

A CAUSAL COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NINTH GRADE ACADEMY AS AN ANSWER
TO UNSUCCESSFUL EIGHTH GRADE TO NINTH GRADE TRANSITION

by

Ursula Dionne Martin

Liberty University

A Dissertation Proposal Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the traditional ninth-grade classroom or the ninth-grade academy would have the greatest impact on retention rates and discipline referrals to administration of students transitioning into high school. The data in this causal-comparative research was secondary data collected from the counselors and administrators of the four schools that participated in this research study. The data was evaluated using an independent samples *t*-test. The results of this study did not indicate the need for transition programs based on the predicted significant statistical difference in the retention rates and in the Group A and B offense discipline referrals to administration of students that were exposed to a ninth-grade academy vs. involvement in a traditional ninth-grade classroom. However, limitations for this study do reveal that there is still a need for further research. These results can assist school systems in finding ways to make sure appropriate decisions are made for the positive transition of ninth-grade students into high school. Additionally, this information can assist high school administrators in finding funding for the program and in building schedules that would support the implementation of ninth-grade academies. There was no statistically significant difference found, in this study, in the retention rate nor the Group A and Group B offense office discipline referral rates of ninth-grade students based on their exposure to a ninth-grade academy vs. a traditional ninth-grade program.

Keywords: small learning community, ninth-grade academy, academic achievement, dropout rates, retention rates, discipline referrals

Dedications

This manuscript is dedicated to my loving, supportive family. To my wonderful husband, Gerald, who not only supported me through this process but also pushed me during times that I thought I simply would not make it to the end. He helped me fight through the tears, frustrations, and the many times that I just thought I would throw up my hands and quit. Thank you honey, and I love you. To my beautiful children, Joshua, Jocelyn, and Dana, who along with my husband, continued to remind me that I could do this and that I could not quit if they were not allowed to quit their journeys. To my parents, Daniel and Janice Dortch, and my siblings, Antoinette Madison, David Dortch, and Daviette Achenbach, who prayed with me and for me through this journey, thank you. I love you all. To my entire Martin family, thank you for all of your love and support through this process. I love each and every one of you.

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List of Abbreviations

Small Learning Communities (SLC)

National Association for School Psychologists (NASP)

Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)

General Education Diploma (GED)

National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)

Junior Reserve Officers Training Corp (JROTC)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Research, Assessments, Grants, and Accountability (RAGA)

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The struggle for eighth grade students to transition to ninth grade successfully has been a decades-long topic of concern. Researchers have worked to find an answer to the transition issues that ninth-grade students have. Many students tend to fail academically as well as socially upon entering ninth grade. Academic failure leads to these students being held back, or retained, in the ninth-grade. Often, students drop out of school after struggling through ninth grade without success. Willens (2013) cites the guide from the National High School Center that states more students fail ninth grade than any other grade and many of the students that are retained tend to drop out. Retention, in the K-12 schools, means these students will remain in the same grade from one year to the next due to not meeting necessary academic requirements to be promoted to the next grade level (“Indicator 14,” 2017). Jacobson (2018) states that “Most research on retention points to the negative effects of requiring students to repeat a grade, such as being more likely to drop out of school” (p. 2).

Students’ struggle trying to “fit in” socially at the new school and failure to do so can also cause academic troubles for new ninth graders. Gossage (2007) refers to the first year of high school as being critical in determining whether students will graduate from high school or not. Many answers have been offered as a solution to the transition problems, such as separating the boys from girls in the classroom upon entrance to ninth grade to remove the distractions in the classroom (“Dividing Boys and Girls,” 2007). Having ninth-grade students separated into small learning communities called “ninth grade academies” to move them away from the influences of the upperclassmen has also been suggested (Brown, 2013). Though many studies describe ninth-grade academies as decreasing drop-out rates and increasing academic

achievement, not many have addressed decreasing ninth-grade discipline referrals to administration and retention rates or the effectiveness of the recommended programs as an answer to the problem. The purpose of this study was to contribute to the understanding that ninth-grade academies effectively assist students in their transition to high school by decreasing discipline referrals to administration and decreasing grade-level retention rates.

Background

Ninth grade has been targeted by researchers as the “make it or break it” year of high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 447). Students entering high school are still immature and must contend with the challenges that come with moving from middle school to high school. Ninth grade is the year of high school when more pressure is placed upon the student to pass courses so that the student is able to advance to the next grade level. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) explain that as a result of the increased demands on students that enter ninth grade, ninth graders have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, the majority of failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than any other high school grade level (p. 448). These new demands consist of an increase in academic workloads, concerns for graduating high school on time, and increased independence and responsibility (Korbey, 2015). Researchers have pinpointed the transition from eighth grade to ninth grade as the one answer to why students have so much trouble during their ninth-grade year (McCallumore and Sparapani, 2010, p. 449). Research suggests that because transitioning into high school is so difficult, ninth graders experience more dropouts and academic failures than all other grade levels (Smith, 1997). In fact, it is not uncommon for student GPAs to decline during their ninth-grade year even if the student was a successful student in eighth grade (Morris, 2015, p. 24). Cook, Fowler, and Harris (2008) also discuss the fact that so many—approximately 25 percent—

students fail the ninth grade that ninth grade becomes a “holding tank,” bulging with the number of true ninth graders plus those that must repeat ninth grade. The struggle for ninth-graders to transition into high school is indicative of a need for transitioning programs.

Research posits that high school transition is important due to high dropout rates and high course failures in the ninth grade. Academic standing during ninth grade is the most predictive indicator of whether a student will drop out of high school ("The Transition to High School," 2013). Poor academic performance is also an indicator of whether or not a student will be retained. With concerns for the high school dropout rate being high, researchers have focused on three main indicators as an accurate measurement of whether a student will drop out of school or continue to graduation: attendance, behavior, and academics (Willens, 2013). Researchers also contend that when considering effective transition, the fewer times a student must transition the more successful the student will be, academically. Akos, Queen, & Lineberry agree by offering their research findings:

- Ninth graders entering high school experience academic achievement losses regardless of whether they attend a middle or K-8 school; those who attend middle school experience two transitions within a 3-year span and experience even more severe losses;
- Students who experience a higher number of transitions are more likely to drop out of high school;
- Children who do not make effective transitions will be less successful in school, have difficulties making friends, and may be vulnerable to mental health problems (Morris, 2015, p. 4).

Morris (2015) argues that there is a dire need to increase successful transition from middle school to high school (p. 4). There is no single solution to the eighth-grade to ninth-grade

transition problem, but researchers agree that ninth-grade academies are a possible solution. Supovitz & Christian (as cited by VanMetre, 2009) state that if a transition program is to be successful, it needs to focus on instruction, have a diversified community, support and legitimize that community, and provide professional development to those supporting that community.

Problem Statement

The problem of this study is that students transitioning from eighth grade to ninth grade tend to have behavior problems and struggle academically. Student success is important, and that success appears to be jeopardized when students transition from school to school (McCallumore & Sparapini, 2010). Students who struggle in the ninth-grade year transition tend to struggle throughout high school (Fields, 2005). Dropout rates are on the rise in the United States. As of 2006-07, the dropout rate in the U.S. was 4.4 percent (“Public School Graduates,” 2009). Students tend to decide to drop out of school after failing to be successful in ninth grade. As of 2015, the dropout rate has decreased and the graduation rate across the U. S. has increased (“Status Dropout Rates,” 2016). Davis (2014) reports that the decrease in dropout rates is due to the implementation of ninth-grade academies in schools. According to Camera (2015), districts across the country have experimented with ninth-grade academies for many years in an effort to increase graduation rates and to “turn around” low performing schools.

Smith (2007) argues that the transition to high school is a “critical phase in students’ lives” (p. 1). Based on his research, Smith (2007) also discusses the fact that in urban schools and in large schools it is common to find high drop-out rates, low academic performance, and many students not graduating on time. The problem is that ninth-grade students do not seem to transition into high school successfully. Groening (2012) adds that a ninth-grade student is five times more likely to fail a class than that same student was in eighth grade.

Ninth graders have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, the majority of failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than any other high school grade level (Fritzer & Herbst, 1996). The ninth grade also has the highest enrollment rate in high schools. This high enrollment rate is primarily due to the fact that approximately 22 percent of students repeat ninth-grade classes (Fritzer & Herbst, 1996). Campioni, cited in Adelman & Taylor (2015), adds that in 1982 there was a 4 percent higher ninth-grade enrollment than eighth grade and that the ninth-grade enrollment increased to 12 percent by 2011. This high ninth-grade enrollment has been termed the “ninth-grade bottleneck” because of the number of retained ninth-grade students (Morton, 2017). Much research has been done on the struggles ninth graders have with transitioning into high school including drop-out rates, academic achievement, and retention rates—but student behavior (discipline referrals to administration) has not received as much attention. In addition, there has not been enough focus on the retention rate in ninth-grade classes and how it affects the students’ future success in high school. Lastly, there are many programs such as early warning systems, bridge programs, and many other suggested programs offered to solve the transitioning issues of ninth-grade students, but there is not much attention given to the effectiveness of these programs.

Researchers such as Kennelly and Monrad (2007), state that many schools have resorted to the use of small learning communities to ease the transition into high school allowing an entire year for students to be acclimated to the high school environment before being integrated with upper classmen. Research has also shown that ninth-grade academies meet many of the needs of the student such as providing counselors and administrators that have a heart for ninth-grade students, to assisting the parents with how to work with their children to help them to be successful in high school (Reents, 2002). Concerns have also been identified about ninth-grade

academies—for example, lack of finance to support the program might hinder the program from attaining the desired results. Scheduling was found to be a concern about ninth-grade academies because a special schedule would be required for the program to be effective. Without more research on the successes of ninth-grade transition programs, specifically ninth-grade academy, many school systems will not see a need to fund these programs and also will not see a need for the small learning community in general. Improved understanding of the benefits ninth-grade academies offer to students transitioning to high school is needed.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this causal-comparative study is to ascertain if ninth-grade academies are an answer to solving the high grade-level retention rate and the numerous discipline referrals made to administrators about ninth-grade students. B. F. Skinner's theory of operant conditioning states that changes in behavior are the result of an individual's response to events that occur in the environment (McLeod, 2015). The principle behind this theory is that behavior that is positively reinforced will reoccur. Skinner's theory relates positive reinforcement to reoccurring behavior. This causal-comparative study will investigate the ability of the ninth-grade academy to reduce the ninth-grade retention rate and to reduce the number of ninth-grade discipline referrals to administration. The ninth-grade academy offers an environment where positive behavior is taught and will be reinforced so that the positive behavior will reoccur. The independent variable, ninth-grade academy, will generally be defined as a small learning community that fosters positive behavior and high self-esteem with the intent of ninth-grade students repeating the positive behavior until the completion of twelfth grade. The independent variable, traditional ninth-grade class, will be generally defined as the normal ninth-grade program in a high school without special provisions. This research will contribute to the

understanding that ninth-grade academies effectively assist students in their transition to high school by decreasing discipline referrals to administration and decreasing the ninth-grade retention rate. This research will also contribute to educators finding better ways to fund the program because of the program's effectiveness and will contribute to administrators' attempts to create schedules that will better accommodate the ninth-grade student. Hampton's (2013) research revealed that ninth-grade academies may be "key to intervention success" (p. 3) but more research and effective implementation is still needed.

Significance of the Study

According to the data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) dropout rates by region, high school students that attend school in the South had a 4.3 percent dropout rate in the 2007-2008 school year. The dropout rate in the South is compared to the 2.3 percent rate in the Northeast, 2.7 percent in the Midwest, and 4.1 percent in the West. Nationally, Black students had higher dropout rates in the 2007-2008 school year than Whites: 6.4 percent for Blacks and 2.3 percent for Whites. The dropout rate for students living in low-income families was approximately 4.5 times greater than students that lived in a high-income family ("What's New at NCES?", 2010). By 2014, the high school overall dropout rate in the United States was 6.5 percent, with Black students at a higher dropout rate at 7.3 percent than Whites at 5.2 percent ("High School Dropout Rates," 2015). Nationwide data displays a consistent yet disturbing trend in which ninth-grade students who had solid or even exemplary academic records before high school become apathetic and disengaged later in their schooling. Many students who had not faced school discipline before ninth grade developed attendance, truancy or behavioral problems during their first year of high school (Fulco, 2009, p. 9). Students graduating from high school on time is of high importance. The schools that will participate in this study each

have experienced high ninth-grade retention rates, a high number of discipline referrals to the administrator, and low academic achievement in their ninth-grade classes. Collectively, the discipline referral rate, ninth-grade retention rate, and low academic achievement increased these schools' dropout rates. This study is significant because, based on the results, ninth-grade academies may be an answer to the problem of retention rates and the number of discipline referrals from teachers to administration, therefore increasing the graduation rate. This study is also significant because very little empirical research has been done on the effectiveness of ninth-grade academies (Somers & Garcia, 2016).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: Is there a significant statistical difference in the retention rate of ninth-grade students based on whether they enrolled or participated in the ninth-grade academy or if they were enrolled in traditional ninth-grade classes?

RQ2: Is there a significant statistical difference in the number of Group A and Group B Offense discipline referrals from teachers to administration for ninth-grade students, whether they enrolled or participated in the ninth-grade academy or if they were enrolled in traditional ninth-grade classes?

Definitions

The dependent and independent variables have been operationally defined for this research as follows:

1. *Discipline referrals to administrators (Office Discipline Referrals)* – a form used by a teacher to report violations of the school's discipline policy. These forms are given to the administrator only after the teacher has made an effort to take care of said violation or if

said violation is categorized as only being handled by an administrator such as the use of drugs or weapons on campus (Pas, Bradshaw & Mitchell, 2011).

2. *Grade level retention* – The process of keeping a student in their present grade because they have not mastered the necessary skills to be promoted the next grade (Renaud, 2013, p. 3).
3. *Effective transition* – The successful advancement of ninth-grade students to the next grade level with the necessary tools to become college- and/or career-ready students (Grossman & Clooney, 2009).
4. *Ninth-grade academy* – A small learning community for ninth graders, within the high school that assists with successful transition into high school (Woestehoff, 2002).
5. *Traditional ninth-grade program* – the normal ninth-grade program that exists in high school without special provisions. This program normally consists of a teacher-centered style of teaching where students typically sit and get.

Students transitioning into high school face many challenges. Several of those challenges are centered around the student's acclimation to their new environment in high school. Often students struggle with poor academic performance and behavior issues as they enter high school. Researchers suggest that there should be a program in place to assist students with their transitioning issues, and the ninth-grade academy program has been shown to meet the needs of transitioning ninth-grade students (Reents, 2002).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter will provide a review of the literature serving as a foundation for this research. The following topics will be discussed: problems with ninth grade, possible solutions to the problems, and concerns about answers to the problems. The purpose of this study is to determine the need for a program to assist eighth-grade students with their transition to ninth grade successfully. Successful transition consists of a low ninth-grade retention rate and a low discipline referral rate to administration or office discipline referral. Ninth-grade academies offer a path to that successful transition.

Theoretical Framework

Student success is important. Understanding why students tend to not be successful as they transition into high school is also important. Statistics cite several reasons why eighth-grade students are not successful in their transition into high school. One sign of unsuccessful eighth grade to ninth grade transition is the fact that students tend to decide to drop out of school after failing ninth grade (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). As of 2006-07, the dropout rate in the U.S., 48 states reporting, was 4.4 percent (“Public School Graduates,” 2009). The U. S. Department of Education reports that the status dropout rate for 2013 and 2014 was 7 percent (“Status Dropout Rates,” 2016).

The theoretical framework for this study will be B. F. Skinner’s theory of operant conditioning. According to McLeod (2015), Skinner believed that one should look at the causes of an action and its consequences to best understand behavior. Skinner’s theory states that behavior that is reinforced will be repeated and that behaviors that are not reinforced will not be repeated (McLeod, 2015). Research suggests that eighth-grade students fail to successfully

transition to high school due to several factors including students being unprepared, low school attendance, and skipping classes (Trejos, 2004). Ninth-grade academies provide the positive, supportive environment ninth-grade students need to be successful (Cook et al., 2008). This environment reinforces the desirable behaviors in students, making their transition from eighth to ninth grade successful. This successful transition leads to a lower ninth-grade retention rate and a lower office discipline referral rate in ninth-grade students.

Empirical Evidence

Skinner uses the example of giving a student five British pounds for completing homework. This reinforcement, called positive reinforcement, causes the behavior to be repeated. Students would continue to complete their homework because of the consequence (reward) given as a result of the behavior (McLeod, 2015). Skinner also offers that negative reinforcement can cause students to repeat a behavior. In his example, the student would pay the teacher five British pounds every time their homework was not completed. The student would definitely continue to complete their homework as to not have to pay the teacher (McLeod, 2015). The actual experiment that Skinner performed consisted of a mouse being placed in the “Skinner box” and food being dropped into the box each time the mouse hit the lever. This consequence caused the mouse to repeat the behavior knowing that it would be rewarded with food. Ninth-grade academies’ supportive environment, consisting of positive relationships between teachers, students, and parents, and a smaller environment for students to successfully transition into ninth grade, will create behaviors in students that will decrease the number of office discipline referrals and decrease the number of students retained in ninth grade.

Related Literature

The Problem

Black (2004) reveals several reasons why eighth-grade to ninth-grade transition for students tends to be unsuccessful (p. 42). Merriam-Webster defines *transition* as the passage from one state, stage, subject, or place to another. Because teachers, parents, and administrators think of transition as a one-day “orientation” or school tour to locate designated areas of the school, they fail to acknowledge studies that suggest that “students’ needs are long-term and comprehensive” (Dedmond, 2006, p. 2). Black (2004) studied Lounsbury and Johnston’s research of transitioning ninth-grade students in 48 states (p. 42). Lounsbury and Johnston’s study showed that ninth-grade students struggle for the following reasons: middle school and high school policies and practices are not the same, 14-year-old developmental needs are not being met, no academic or social guidance available for ninth graders, and high school instruction is more teacher-centered (Black, 2004, p. 42). Davis (2014) adds that students’ inability to meet expectations concerning school rules and coursework can lead to students having to repeat the ninth grade. The Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2005) suggests that the transition to high school can be highly emotional making what is already a hard situation worse (“Supporting Successful Transition,” p. 1). Brown (2013) states that students are far less likely to graduate when they have the problems that Lounsbury and Johnston’s research uncovered. Cox, Hopkins, & Buckman (2015) add that students often do not receive the extra support needed to transition successfully into high school.

Likewise, Neild (2009) discusses four reasons ninth grade is difficult for students entering high school. One reason offered is that parents tend to feel their children do not need them as much in high school so they do not supervise their children as closely as they did when the child was in middle school. The second reason he offers is that, in moving to a new school,

students must break the bonds they have formed with their middle-school teachers and peers. The third reason for transition issues is that some students are inadequately prepared for high school. The fourth and final reason Neild gives for students not being successful in their transition into high school is that the organization of some high schools is itself a major source of students' difficulty. This author's research also concludes that teachers that provide more help to students with their personal problems tend to decrease the failure rate. This type of help can be offered within a ninth-grade academy. An environment that is separate from the influences of the upperclassmen for ninth graders makes it possible to offer more help to students both academically and personally.

Additionally, Smith (2007) agrees that the transition to high school is a "critical phase in students' lives" (p. 1). Based on his research, Smith (2007) also discusses the fact that in urban schools and large schools, it is common to find high drop-out rates, low academic performance, and many students not graduating on time. Students that do not graduate on time have to repeat grades that the student did not successfully pass. Ninth grade tends to be the grade most repeated. According to Bottoms (2008), despite the importance of ninth-grade year, the failure rate in grade nine remains higher than the rate in any other grade level. Reents (2002) concurs by stating that ninth grade is the "most critical point to intervene and prevent students from losing motivation, failing, and dropping out of school" (p. 1).

Student relationships with each other and with teachers play a role in whether their transition to high school is positive or negative. Students that lack positive relationships with other students and staff members experience a lack of social capital and this is directly related to dropout rates (Becker & Luthar, 2002). Juvonen (2006) states that belongingness is connected to decisions by youth to drop out or to remain in school. Lack of connectedness to school for

students can cause academic performance to suffer (Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, et al., 2014). Edward & Mullis (2001) also adds that lack of a sense of belonging can impede student motivation.

Uniquely, students that drop out of high school do so because they are not on-track to graduate. According to Allensworth and Easton (2005), students who are on-track to graduate tend to remain in school until they graduate. Featherston (2010) adds that failing grades, poor attendance, and difficulty transitioning into high school are factors that could hinder students from graduating. This means that a successful transition to ninth grade is of high importance to students remaining in school until graduation (Roybal, et al., 2014). Reents (2002) adds “Our research found that we have more ninth-graders drop out of school because they get lost in a large high school setting and have less attention paid to them as individuals” (p.14).

McCallumore’s and Sparapani’s (2010) research reveals that the largest enrollment in high schools is in the ninth-grade class due to the fact that approximately 22 percent of the students repeat the ninth grade. These authors also revealed that 40 percent of ninth-grade students suffer serious problems after the transition to high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 448). Princeton University and the Brooklyn Institute’s research reveal that ninth grade has become what is called a “bottleneck” for students (Nadeem, 2013). Wheelock and Miao (2005) note that enrollment at any grade level should be about the same as at the previous grade level. The research done by Princeton University and the Brooklyn Institute found that even in 1970 “there were 3% fewer tenth graders than ninth graders; by 2000, that share had risen to 11%” (Nadeem, 2013, para. 1). This means the ninth-grade struggle has been an issue for decades. Alabama is one of 16 states that participates with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) which reports that 13 percent more students were enrolled in ninth grade than

were enrolled in eighth grade in 2009 (“2012 Progress Report,” 2012). It is thought that ninth-grade academy’s segregation allows the students to get better acquainted with what is expected of them academically and also allows students to become more mature (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 451).

Equally important, Mizelle (2003), explains that many students entering high school experience a drop—in both grades and attendance. Their self-esteem is low and many drop out of school by the end of their 10th grade year of school. Mizelle also states that the middle school environment is very different from the high school environment (2003). Often there is a discrepancy between the school policies and practices from middle school to high school according to Styron and Peasant (2010). The developmental needs of 14-year-old students, typical ninth graders, are different from those of the 13-year-old middle school student (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Cofield (2012) states that these differences can lead to the ninth-grade students’ inability to meet academic expectations.

Students’ social needs must also be met for a successful transition into high school. Because so many students leave middle school popular socially, with good grades and with little to no behavior problems, they enter high school enthusiastic about meeting new people and about facing new challenges. It is important for the students to keep that enthusiasm. Longobardi, Prino, Marengo & Settanni (2016) suggest that a positive student-teacher relationship can help support students in their transition process. Teacher support can lead to “higher positive social and emotional well-being of the student” (Longobardi et al., 2016, p. 2). Langenkamp (2005) supports the Longobardi et al. idea that social relationships, whether with other students or with teachers, play a major role in the ability to transition into high school.

According to Nola-Ganey (2007), barriers that prevent students from being successful in

ninth grade consist of the following: (a) moving from a small middle school to a large high school; (b) transitioning from being known by faculty and staff to becoming unknown to many; (c) experiencing less trained teachers; (d) lacking the skills, routines, and attitudes needed to succeed in the high school setting; (e) transitioning from being the oldest students in the building to the youngest students on the campus; (f) experiencing the typical struggles of adolescence; and (g) lacking motivation, awareness, and support.

Likewise, Gossage's (2007) interviews with unsuccessful ninth graders revealed that these students typically had discipline problems, attendance problems, and academic problems, all of which led them to drop out of school or not return to school the next year. There must be more than one suggestion as to how to solve the transition issues of ninth-grade students (Gossage, 2007). These barriers prompted suggestions from Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) that students should be oriented to high school, they should be provided enrollment information, clear directions and layout of the building they will be moving to, and more information on credits and graduation requirements. It was also suggested that incoming ninth-grade students be taught coping skills and that students with the potential for a high number of stressors be identified and provided support (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999).

Traditional Ninth Grade Programs

When traditional ninth-grade programs were studied, it was found that these programs lacked what ninth-grade students needed to thrive. According to Lounsbury and Johnston, often policies are in place that are not upheld by administration (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Styron & Peasant (2010) comment that Lounsbury and Johnston's study revealed that student involvement was passive and classroom instruction was about the teacher. Also, lack of adequate guidance for ninth graders was cited by Lounsbury and Johnston as being another issue with traditional

ninth-grade programs (Styron & Peasant, 2010).

According to Ghezzi (2009), ninth-grade students face many challenges when entering the traditional ninth-grade program. Students face noisy and chaotic hallways, grueling class schedules, and unfamiliar grading periods where the grades now count towards graduation (Ghezzi, 2009). Lee & Smith (1995) added that high schools are more “bureaucratic” than middle schools and this can cause the climate of the school to be depersonalized and noncommunal.

Because many traditional schools offer several different paths for ninth-grade students to take, such as college prep, honors, or technical, ninth-grade students are often confused about what classes to take without proper guidance (Ghezzi, 2009). According to Ghezzi, parental support and the assistance of a counselor can help students to make the correct decisions about which path to take, but not having a specific support group for ninth-grade students could still leave some things not quite clear (2009).

Additionally, Kemple, Connell, Legters, & Eccles (2015) agree that the traditional ninth-grade programs do not offer all the “comforts” students are accustomed to having in elementary and middle school. Students do not have the opportunity to connect with teachers in high school because of the size and structure of most high schools (Kemple et al., 2015). Lack of connection between teachers and students is also attributed to an increased focus on content rather than the development of the whole child (Kemple et al., 2015). Also, social support and mentorship are documented as necessary for good adolescent development and also for successful transition into high school (Kemple et al., 2015). Williams (2005) adds that students in traditional ninth-grade programs are left alone to try to understand how academic concepts relate to the workplace and to the society they live and work in.

Portrait of Ninth Grade Academy

Ninth-grade academies are defined by not only being small in size, but by their structure, teaming concepts, and additional opportunities offered to their students (Bennett, 2012, p. 28). Snipes (2015) cites Letgers, Parise, and Rappaport's (2013) suggestion that there are four necessary components for a true Ninth-Grade Academy to properly function: a high school principal specifically dedicated to the academy—this could be an assistant principal that only works with the ninth-grade students and teachers—, a separate space designated to the ninth-grade students, a specific faculty dedicated to the ninth-grade students, and an inter-disciplinary collaborative structure. Although Letgers et al. (2013) suggest that only four components are needed for a true ninth-grade academy, McIntosh & White (2006), through their own research on ninth-grade academies, determined that there are 12 strategies necessary for ninth-grade academies to work: (a) the academy must have its own core teachers, principal, counselor, and student lockers located within the academy, (b) teachers within the academy should share the same cohort of students, (c) common planning time so that the core teachers can collaborate on interventions for students who are at-risk, plan student activities, and develop communities of professional learning, (d) freshman counselor collaborating with the middle school counselor to make sure that students are placed in the proper freshman courses, (e) freshmen all on the same lunch wave with all freshman teachers, (f) special activities to take place specifically on freshman lunch wave, (g) pure freshman homerooms, (h) each freshman homeroom should have a student council representative, (i) freshman teacher annual retreat time to plan, bond, and develop common practices, (j) specific stakeholders (principal, counselor, an intervention teacher) to remain with the freshman academy every year and not move to the next class when the students move, (k) developed and improved eighth grade transition activities, (l) a freshman

orientation that lasts for three hours during the month of August. Small learning communities (small school or school-within-a-school) should use several strategies to address the transition issues ninth-grade students face upon entering high school (Bennett, 2012, p. 33).

Ninth grade academies also address discipline issues that ninth grade students face. Fernandes, assistant superintendent of secondary education of the Stamford School District, is quoted as saying “In ninth grade we see the highest percentage of failures, lower attendance, and the highest percentage of discipline referrals” (“Stamford Fights,” 2014, para. 5). According to Bennett (2012), ninth-grade academies have fewer discipline problems and attributes that to the relationships that are formed between the teachers, students, and parents in the ninth-grade academy (p. 30). Because of the small environment of the ninth-grade academy, it is easy for students to foster good relationships. Those good relationships cause students to attend school more and to feel safer and therefore have fewer discipline problems (Wasley et al., 2000). Mullis (2009) agrees that ninth-grade academies decrease both discipline referrals and retention rates. School systems in South Carolina implemented ninth-grade academies that were aligned with the following middle school practices:

- core classes that met every day for forty-five minutes,
- students grouped together in teams,
- common planning times for core teachers,
- a freshman success class taught to students, and
- a designated part of the building or a separate building to house the freshman students together (Mullis, 2009, p. 20-21).

According to Mullis (2009), there was a decline in discipline referrals from ninth grade students and a decline in the retention rate for ninth graders due to the implementation of the ninth-grade

academy (p. 44). Nola-Ganey (2007) cites Southern Regional Education Board's "High Schools That Work" (HSTW) case study done at Grady High School in Atlanta, Georgia. The data shows that the implementation of a ninth-grade academy as a strategy for meeting the needs of the ninth-grade student was effective:

Table 1

Results of Implementing Ninth Grade Academy in Grady High School in Atlanta

9 th grade failure rate	⇒	35% in 1995 to 11% in 2004
9 th grade passage rates in College prep English	⇒	51% in 2000 to 98% in 2004
9 th grade passage in College prep Algebra I	⇒	40% in 2000 to 93% in 2004
9 th grade retention	⇒	18% to 11%
Graduation	⇒	56% in 2002 to 89% in 2005

Note. Reprinted from: Nola-Ganey, D. (2007). *Reducing dropouts 9th grade redesign initiative* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from: <http://slideplayer.com/slide/6757034/>

Germantown High School in Philadelphia has seen success in what they call their Ninth-Grade Success Academy. Class sizes are about 30 students per classroom team, but students report that they learn more in this setting (Edmunds, 2003).

Dedmond (2006) offers the following benefits of freshman transition courses:

- Creates enthusiasm and appreciation for the educational process.
- Offers relevant themes for academic skill development.
- Helps students discover their identity and builds self-esteem.
- Supports guidance and counseling goals by helping students develop education and

career plans.

- Supports improved pass rates from 9th to 10th grade (p. 5)

There must also be measurements of the transition program's effectiveness. Dedmond (2006)

finds that the indicators of effective programs should consist of:

- decreased absentee rates,
- steady or increased GPA,
- steady or increased participation in cocurricular activities,
- decreased truancy,
- fewer discipline incidents,
- positive mental health,
- goal-oriented students, and
- involved parents (p. 5)

Much research has been done on freshman transition programs but there has not been a specific focus, in that research, on the measurement of effectiveness of the transition programs. One school district in North Carolina did, however, find that ninth-grade academies were effective as evidenced by a decrease in their ninth-grade retention rate and a decrease in their drop-out rate (Maxwell, Price, & Sunmono, 2014). Maxwell et al. (2014) found that the implementation of ninth-grade academies in their school system decreased the ninth-grade retention rate by fifteen percent.

Retention Concerns

According to a study done by West (2009), across six states, more than 90,000 students repeated ninth grade during the 2004-2005 school year. Meador (2018) posits that there are both positive and negative effects of retaining students that retention can help some students but may

be harmful to others. To be clear, many studies show that retention is not the most effective for promoting long-term positive academic achievement (Aldridge & Goldman, 2010). Students are sometimes more at risk for being retained. Students with the highest risk for retention are: a) male, b) African American or Hispanic, c) have a late birthday, d) late development and/or attention problems, e) live in poverty, f) live in a single-parent home, g) have parents with lower educational attainment, h) have parents that are not involved in their education, i) have behavior problems, j) and have reading problems (“Position Statement on Student Grade Retention,” 2003).

There are other implications to students being retained. According to Aldridge & Goldman (2010), students who are retained “tend to feel poorly about their abilities, score lower on personal and psychological adjustment, and display more discipline problems” (p. 137). Retention has the most positive impact when the students being held back receive specific remediation that addresses specific issues and promotes achievement and social skills (“Repeating a Grade,” 2015). Hennick (2008) affirms repeating a grade without modification in curriculum or teaching strategies is not likely to improve a child’s chance of being successful the second time around.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) also comments that before students drop out, retained students cause problems with scheduling—both because they need to be placed back in a class that was failed and because they negatively influence other students (“Repeating a Grade,” 2015). Retained students suffer in every aspect of academics as well as socio-emotionally (2015). Robinson (2004) reveals that retentions in high school happen due to students not earning enough credits, Carnegie Units, to be moved forward to the next grade. The American Federation of Teachers state that for students in urban school districts, the retention

rate has been estimated to be approximately 50 percent (Aldridge & Goldman, 2010). In the Mobile County Public Schools System district, students must earn a minimum of seven credits to be promoted to the tenth grade even though there are a total of nine credits to be earned. This means a student may be promoted with seven credits, but must still retake the courses that they did not earn the two credits in to make the total of nine credits that were supposed to be earned. This system of promotion was brought about to reduce the ninth-grade retention rate. According to Edley and Wald (2002), students do not respond in the way educators' desire them to, with being retained in ninth grade. In the critical ninth-grade year, student retention is "the single largest predictor of whether he or she will drop out" (Edley & Wald, 2002, p. 1). Because social promotion is no longer in practice and grade retention is based on the students earning a specific number of credits, the ninth-grade retention rates increase (Morris, 1993). With that in mind, the goal of retaining students is to give students the opportunity to master what they were not able to master the first time taking a particular course (Robinson, 2004). The ninth-grade retention rate is creating the "ninth-grade bulge" and the "tenth-grade dip" according to Cook et al. (2008, p. 1). Research offers suggestions to change how the eighth grade to ninth grade transition affects retention rates—such as ninth-grade academies. Ninth-grade academies have consistently shown a decrease in retention rates in ninth-grade students (Cook et al., 2008).

There are other reasons that student retention rates tend to be high. Heppen & Therriault cite Neild & Balfanz (2006) as stating that the number of absences during the first 30 days of high school is a risk factor for ninth-grade failure (2008). Retention and failure rates are higher in ninth grade than any other grade, per Smith (2006). The rate of ninth-grade retention over the last 30 years has more than tripled (Cook, 2015). Retention, among many things, puts students at risk for dropping out of school (Leischer, 2011). Jimerson, Woehr, Kaufman & Anderson.

(2004) agree that students that have been retained are more likely to drop out of school. According to Jimerson, et al. (2004) studies show that after being retained, achievement gains decline within two to three years, meaning these students either do not do better or sometimes do worse. Many retained students do not tend to “catch up” without some type of specified intervention (Jimerson, et al., 2004). Students that have to repeat a grade typically end up with low self-esteem and judgement from their peers (Willens, 2013). In addition, there are also increased health-compromising behaviors in retained students, according to the National Association of School Psychologists (“NASP position, 2003, p. 2). These behaviors consist of emotional distress, cigarette use, alcohol use, drug abuse, drinking and driving, drinking with sex, early onset of sexual activity, and suicidal intentions (NASP, 2003).

In agreement, Bornshauer et al. (2011) discuss the fact that dropout rates at the high school level have increased due to student retention during their ninth-grade year. More research supports the fact that students who have been retained tend to drop out of high school. According to Shah (2005), retaining ninth-grade students can discourage them, causing them to either drop out or pursue a different type of diploma, the General Education Diploma (GED). These concerns have grown to be so great that John Winn of Palm Beach Florida desires that legislature eliminate all high school retention (Shah, 2005, p. 9A). Edley and Wald (2002) state that retaining students creates fear and leaves a sense of humiliation and that these two emotions are not good motivators for struggling students (p. 1).

Trejos (2004) comments that students being unprepared is not the only reason that ninth-grade retention is high. Students that have done well in middle school are sometimes overwhelmed by the “size and complexity of today’s high school” (Trejos, 2004, p. A01). Trejos (2004) also suggests that many times there are students who are retained because they simply do

not want to go to class and fail classes due to lack of attendance. Moreover, the International Reading Association (2014) states that the strong focus on state testing contributes significantly to the ninth-grade retention rate (“Using High Stakes”).

Discipline Concerns

Discipline has been a long-time concern for students at all grade levels. Discipline is especially a concerning issue for ninth-grade students. Ford (2015) comments that disruptive behavior can interrupt the entire learning process in the classroom (p. ii). Stout and Christensen (2009) state that students that have behavioral issues and are disruptive in the school environment tend to have multiple discipline referrals. Many times, schools wait until students fail or accumulate multiple discipline referrals before addressing the problem (Lamie, 2014). Sugai, Sprague, Horner, and Walker (2000) define office discipline referrals as:

An event in which (a) a student engaged in a behavior that violated a rule/social norm in the school, (b) a problem behavior was observed by a member of the school staff, and (c) the event resulted in a consequence delivered by administrative staff who produced a permanent (written) product defining the whole event. (p. 96)

Discipline during transition years has gained the attention of many researchers who have consistently sought an answer to the transition struggles ninth-grade students deal with daily. Hale (2008) discusses the fact that high school freshmen are reported as having the most discipline referrals and the lowest academic performance. According to Hale’s research, ninth-grade students make up the highest percentage of discipline referrals and absences at Upstate High School (2008). Office discipline referrals are a means of tracking student behavior that is out of the norm (Wiley, 2008). The office discipline referral contains very detailed information

including the student's name, grade level, gender, time of day, the specific infraction, motivation for the infraction, location of the incident, person issuing the referral, and the administrative consequences applied to the student's behavior (Wiley, 2008). There are many ways for all of the detailed information collected in an office discipline referral to be used. Wright and Dusek (1998) offer a list of specific uses of office discipline referrals measures:

1. to measure aggression,
2. to compare schools and different interventions or approaches to management in schools,
3. to compare and make predictions about behaviors within student subgroups, and
4. to identify early in the school year students who have special behavioral support needs.

Studies have been done to determine the effect of office discipline referrals on student academics. One such study was done in a small school district in the Pacific Northwest. This study revealed that the more office discipline referrals a student had, the lower the grade point averages were in the Spring of the school year (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun &, 2008). In fact, McIntosh et al. (2008) used the method of counting the number of office discipline referrals to determine what support individual students needed. Using descriptive criteria from more than 400 schools at all levels researchers found that:

- Students with 0 to 1 office discipline referrals per year were determined to be adequately supported by the schoolwide system of behavior support (primary support).
- Students with 2 to 5 office discipline referrals were determined to need moderate additional support to be successful (secondary support).

- Students with 6 or more office discipline referrals were determined to need intensive, individualized support (tertiary support). (McIntosh et al., 2008).

Possible Solutions

Tara Madden was quoted as saying “Without some type of help or intervention, a first-time ninth grader in high school struggles, even for students that did well in K through eight” (Camera, 2015, p. 1). Suggestions have been made as to what would be effective ways for transition to take place. The following interventions have been indicated as being effective for transition:

- Planning session between middle schools and high school teachers.
- Involvement of parents in high school activities.
- Assistance for students with homework.
- Incentive programs for attendance, grades and citizenship.
- System to earn credit each semester or each quarter.
- Block schedules for core classes.
- Closed campus.
- Small learning communities.
- Celebrations of student successes. (Roybal et al., 2014)

Some researchers suggest that at least three strategies be implemented together while others suggest implementing at least five (Roybal, et al., 2014). McBrady (2004) cites several of NASSPs *Breaking Ranks II* Recommendations and the strategies that would help implement those recommendations:

Table 2

NASSPs Breaking Ranks II Strategies Recommendations

Breaking Ranks Recommendations	Strategies used to implement recommendations
Recommendation 10: High schools will create small units in which anonymity is banished.	Student-led conferences Freshman orientation Looping Students remaining with the same group of peers Houses/clusters/school within a school Peer mentors Personal Adult Advocates Freshmen academies Career academies Transition program to adult life
Recommendation 13: Every high school student will have a Personal Adult Advocate to help him or her personalize the educational experience.	Personal Adult Advocates Flexible Scheduling Advisories Personal plan for progress
Recommendation 14: Teachers will convey a sense of caring so that students feel that their teachers share a stake in their learning.	Team Teaching Use of data to determine what programs are needed

Note. National Association of Secondary School Principals. (2004), *Breaking Ranks II*. Reston, VA.

These strategies, as suggested by many other researchers, include small learning communities or ninth-grade academies as a solution to the transition struggle. Uvaas and McKeivitt's 2013 article states that ninth-grade transition programs, curriculum and academic support and intervention promote school connectedness and have a school within a school structure for ninth-grade students (Uvaas & McKeivitt, qtd. in Walker, 2016).

Support for transition should also include programs designed to deepen students' knowledge, increase both social and emotional problem-solving capabilities, and enhance how

the students feel about self-determination, competence, and connectedness with support staff (“Supporting Successful Transition,” 2005, p. 1). The New South Wales Public Schools (2011) lists the four phases of transition as being:

- Preparation: the careful planning of activities during the primary school years that prepare students for secondary school (middle and high school).
- Transfer: the period of time when there is a high level of direct interaction between the students that are leaving their primary school and their new secondary school. Those activities can include parent meetings and students visiting their new secondary school.
- Induction: At grade seven, the secondary schools would begin to provide programs intended to orient students to the operations of the high school. These programs would offer support learning, social, and personal aspects of transition.
- Consolidation: activities, for the secondary school’s overall student welfare, should be introduced. These activities should be introduced late seventh grade and early eighth grade school years and designed to provide students with the means to manage their own learning.

Many solutions have been offered as a way to ease the transition into high school, including teacher involvement. Teachers play a role in how students transition into high school. The more considerate and caring a teacher is, the easier it is for students to make the transition to high school, but the more intimidating and inflexible a teacher is makes the transition more of a challenge (Roybal et al., 2014). Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) suggest that small learning communities would allow teachers time to collaborate on workload for ninth-graders as a way to help with the transition struggles.

Bridge Programs

Why implement a bridge program?

Bridge programs are also offered as a solution to the ninth-grade transition issue.

Cushman (2006), suggests a bridge program to allow the students to acclimate themselves to the high school environment. Simply having the students try out for sports teams over the summer or allowing the incoming ninth graders to experience summer school, prior to the beginning of their ninth-grade year, could ease their minds about the move to the high school environment (Cushman, 2006). Cushman also suggests matching students with a mentor. These mentors would check on these students during the school year.

Consequently, students agree with Cushman's suggestion that ninth-grade students need to be bridged into ninth grade for acclimation to the school in general (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Students felt they needed to know their way around the building and they needed to understand how classes were scheduled (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Butts suggests that ninth graders need a full transition program completely supported by the school to address the needs of the new ninth graders. Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) suggest that orienting students to the high school environment, giving them a good understanding of what will be expected of them, and giving them information on the credit system and graduation requirements are all ways to ease the transition to high school. Students' feelings of being forgotten and lost and their struggle to acclimate themselves to the larger schools were offered as reasons for students needing an adjustment period when entering high school (Butts and Cruzeiro, 2005).

Mizelle (2003) agrees that bridge programs can help address the transition problem middle school students experience. This program would consist of parents bringing students to the high school they intended to enter in the fall for a day or two to introduce them to the school

and to meet their new teachers. In meeting these teachers, the students would be given the school rules and requirements.

One school system's implementation of a bridge program proved to help their ninth-grade students transition into high school with ease. Geltner, Law, Forehand, & Miles (2011) discuss a school system in Georgia implementing a bridge program called the CAT Camp that allowed upcoming ninth-grade students to attend a camp during the summer, exposing them to many of the things the students would experience upon entering high school (2011). According to Geltner et al. (2011), the overall result of students attending CAT Camp was a higher promotion rate, fewer course failures, fewer discipline referrals, better attendance, and a higher GPA than students who did not attend the camp.

Concerns about bridge programs

Bridge programs can be effective if implemented properly. Warren, Fazekas, Rennie-Hill, Fancsali, & Jaffe-Walters' (2011) study concluded that often the bridge programs or orientation programs are limited, not mandatory for the students that truly need it, and only last for a brief period of time. Also, if there is not adequate funding available for bridge programs, then the effort to prepare incoming ninth grade students will be limited (Warren et al., 2011).

Early Warning System

Early warning systems help to "save" the ninth-grade student from failure by allowing the teacher to focus on collected data such as attendance and student engagement and course performance, to be able to make informed decisions (Brundage, 2014). Sarlo (1997-2017) states that it is important in a secondary school to develop and implement an early warning system that identifies at-risk students through the analysis of student data, both academic and engagement. Warren et al. (2011) add that the transition process can be considerably strengthened if high

schools receive early data about the academic needs of the incoming students and that data could come from either the central office or from the exchange of information between the middle and high schools. Using this academic needs data as early as possible will help teachers and administration create and apply a more effective prevention and early intervention plan (Sarlo, 1997-2017). In one study, an early warning system was used with ninth graders to identify students at risk by using early warning signs that would determine if students would graduate from high school (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2010). Part of the early warning system is making sure that students are “on-track” which means they are not failing enough classes to keep them from being promoted to next grade level (McClatchy, 2010). McClatchy (2010) states that the on-track monitoring helps focus on students’ performance during that critical freshman year so that the students most at risk can be reached and redirected before it is too late.

According to Heppen & Therriault (2008), low attendance and low course performance are the main factors that cause student failure rates in high school and should be a part of the focus of an early warning system (2008). It was also suggested that student engagement and end-of-course tests should be a focus when implementing an early warning system for ninth graders (O’Cummings, 2010). Mac Iver and Mac Iver (2010) agree with O’Cummings that student disengagement is a factor in student retention but also offer that high ninth-grade core course failure rates contribute to the need for an early warning system in high school. Paying attention to the early warning indicators such as attendance and course performance could help to implement the early warning system before it is too late to act (Mac Iver, M & Mac Iver, D, 2010).

Several different early warning system programs were implemented in one school to determine which was most appropriate. Credit recovery labs were developed as a means of

reaching the seniors in the school that were already off track for graduation (Sarlo, 1997-2017). Ninth-grade academies were also established as an early warning system that included a goal of frequent progress monitoring and daily advisement periods to help keep the ninth-grade students on track (Sarlo, 1997-2017).

Gender Separation

Separating the boys and girls into different classrooms has also been offered as a solution to the ninth-grade transition issue. The move to separate genders in the classroom is based on the hypothesis that male and female brains develop differently and require each gender to be taught in a way that they can learn based on how their brains are hardwired (Holthouse, 2010). Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001) comment that when students are in class together they tend to be distracted by “raging hormones,” academic cheating, and disciplinary problems. Datnow et al., also suggest that the way girls and boys are disciplined should be differentiated (2001). Holthouse (2010) discusses how the typical male and female classroom should operate. Male classrooms are typically loud with a teacher that is constantly moving around. An all-female class is typically quiet without much motion from the teacher (Holthouse, 2010). With these thoughts in mind, often the gender separation concept is taken to the extreme by not allowing the students to even speak to each other when passing in the halls (Holthouse, 2010). Holthouse comments that this type of harsh regulation causes many to believe that there is no true evidence that Single Sex Public Education, SSPE, is benefiting either sex (2010).

According to Chadwell (2010), single-gender classes are being offered in ninth grade in urban, suburban, and rural districts across the state of South Carolina. Chadwell (2010) states, in a different article, that the opportunity to be exposed to a single-gender classroom increases academic achievement and decreases discipline referrals (p.16). When surveyed, students in

single-gender classrooms in South Carolina stated that their self-confidence, motivation, independence, and participation increased due to exposure to this type of classroom (Chadwell, 2010). Students, in a study done in a California school district, admitted that being separated from the opposite sex had some benefits (Datnow et al., 2001). The greatest benefit was a decrease in discipline issues in class (Datnow et al., 2001).

One drawback of this type of program is that it is voluntary, meaning all students may not have the chance to experience the benefits of the single-gender classroom (Chadwell, 2010). This lack of participation in the single-gender classroom may be due to parents feeling that this type of program is not beneficial for their child. According to Holthouse (2010), two parents threatened to file a lawsuit against one school system because they felt that their children were not being treated fairly in an SSPE school. These parents felt that the segregated classrooms were not practical considering that the “real world is integrated” (Holthouse, 2010, p. 26). In California, funding to keep the gender-specific schools open was a major issue. Although it appeared that the gender-specific academies seemed to be successful, there were several reasons they were not supported, including politics and a lack of a theoretical basis to continue the program (Datnow et al., 2001).

Small Learning Communities

Cox, Hopkins, & Buckman (2015) expressed that nationally, ninth grade is the year that determines whether a student will complete school and earn a diploma. Because many students attend very large high schools, in schools that have upwards of 2,000 students, ninth-grade students often struggle with transitioning into such a large environment. Many small learning community structures have been offered as a solution to ninth-grade transition issues such as career academies, ninth grade academies, magnet schools, school-within-a-school, and house

plans (Bernstein, Millsap, Schimmenti, & Page, 2008).

In 2014, the U. S. Department of Education reported that from 2000 to 2009, \$45 million to over \$173 million in grant awards were appropriated to school districts that implemented small learning communities as a way to reform high schools. One Texas school system experienced success with the implementation of a ninth-grade transition program as evidenced by an increase in attendance, improved student behavior, improved test scores, and improved number of students receiving enough credits to move to the tenth grade (Peasant, 2006). Of the different small learning community structures suggested, ninth-grade academy is stated as the one to show the most improvement in ninth-grade students being it was the one that offered the most support (Bernstein et. al., 2008). Woestehoff (2002) offers this definition of ninth-grade academy:

The Ninth-Grade Academy is a SLC - a small learning community - wherein individual students are shared within a team of four core subject teachers. Each team is then able to focus on individual student needs. The academy's main goal is to allow the students to transition smoothly into the high school experience and to develop the skills they need to be promoted to the sophomore level. (p. 1)

Chen (2017) cites a study conducted by Boston College that agrees with Woestehoff's definition of ninth-grade academies. The overall consensus of those that have implemented ninth-grade academies is that ninth-grade students isolated in a designated area or building in the school does ease transition to high school (Chen, 2017). This type of isolation allows students to receive personalized learning.

Since ninth-grade academies are defined as small learning communities, several

researchers spent a great deal of effort developing an understanding of the small learning community by creating guidelines for its success. According to Cotton (2001), there are five categories of conditions and practices that would make a successful small learning community:

- self – determination,
- identity,
- personalization,
- support for teachers, and
- functional accountability.

Additionally, Darling-Hammond (1996) offers four factors that are important for personalized learning in a small learning community:

- Structures that provide serious learning and caring in a way that enables teachers to get to know their students well and to work with them “intensely.”
- Shared exhibitions of students’ work so that the school values are made clear, and to show how students are doing.
- Structures that consists of teacher teams, supporting teacher collaboration and student learning.
- Shared decision-making and dialogue structures about teaching and learning with other teachers, students, and parents.

Equally important are Habeeb’s (2013) key components for maximizing the impact of a freshman transition program:

- Make it difficult for students to “slip through the cracks” by making the high school environment more nurturing.
- Help students and teachers understand what their position is in the transition program

- by standardizing expectations.
- Equip students with belief systems they need to learn and succeed.
 - Create classroom cultures that foster excellence.
 - Students should be taught organizational and time-management skills.
 - Foster effective parent-teacher contact.
 - Ensure that freshman teachers use the latest and greatest strategies in pedagogy and technology and that they grow professionally.
 - Make freshmen feel at home in their school and recognize them for their accomplishments.
 - Provide support services to students who fall behind, proactively.

Bennett (2012) cites Daggett and Meeder's (2011) ten components of successful school reform from their research on small learning communities: (a) a culture that embraces a rigorous and relevant curriculum must be created, (b) data should be used to provide clear unwavering focus, (c) high expectations should be set and monitored for continued student improvement, (d) a framework that organizes curriculum that drives instruction should be created, (e) students should be provided real-world applications, (f) multiple pathways to rigor and relevance should be created, (g) sustained professional development that is focused should be provided, (h) parent and community involvement should be obtained and leveraged, (i) a safe and orderly school should be maintained, and (j) effective leadership development should be offered (p. 23).

The small learning community program was first launched in 2001 by the U. S. Department of Education (Warren et al. , 2011). Five-year grants were provided to local educational agencies to support the implementation of small learning communities, such as ninth-grade academies (Warren et al., 2011). Bernstein et al. (2008) commented on the

legislation authorizing the small learning community program by stating that grantees were given considerable room to determine how the small learning communities would be implemented. Several strategies were suggested for large high schools that were being restructured such as block scheduling, freshman academies, multiyear groupings, and other programs that could offer a more personalized high school experience and also improve student achievement (Bernstein et al., 2008). In addition, Kuo (2010) discussed Congress' authorization of small learning community programs as a way to address the concerns about large high schools. Between 2000 and 2004, 500 million dollars was set aside to help local agencies decide on the type of program that would benefit them most such as SLCs (Kuo, 2010).

Holland and Mazzoli (2001) support the idea of a ninth-grade academy as a transition place for freshman coming into high school for the first time. What is known about the ninth-grade academy, according to Holland and Mazzoli (2001), is that it does meet every need of the student. This program helps with everything from feeding students that appear to be hungry to helping the students and their parents work together toward success. Ghezzi (2009) states that ninth grade academies offer a support system to ninth grade students to help them sort out all of the difficult parts of entering high school such as scheduling and choosing a course path. Part of the “framework” of successful ninth-grade academies is coursework rigor in the classroom, relevant learning opportunities, and relationships with teachers that are meaningful (Bennett, 2012, p. 24).

Lambert & Lowery (2004) list four stages for creating meaningful relationships in small learning communities. The first stage consists of teachers acknowledging a need for personalization and implementing structures to support personalization. In the second stage, teachers and students begin to see a different relationship due to involvement in the small

learning community. Also, the role of the stakeholders (teachers, administrators, counselors) begins to expand. Stage two also lends time to teachers discussing practices for the individual learner. Stage three consists of teachers meeting the individual needs of the students by changing their practices and using school data (attendance, discipline referrals, and test scores) to plan for the future. The last stage is a continuation of stage three in that teachers continue to search for professional development opportunities and use collected data to support teaching and learning in a small learning community (Lambert & Lowery, 2004). Bennett (2012) adds to Lambert & Lowery's discussion on meaningful relationship by citing The National Conference for State Legislatures (2010) that students that have developed a meaningful school relationship with an adult are more likely to be successful (p. 27). Small learning communities promote relationships that keep students connected their school and allow teachers to better relate to and respond to students' needs (Oxley, 2001).

A study in a Georgia high school showed a decrease in discipline incidents by 55 percent and failure rates down by 46 percent after the implementation of a ninth-grade academy (Chmelynski, 2004). Teachers should volunteer to work in the academy because they desire to see the ninth graders succeed in transitioning into high school. The teachers should also desire to see ninth graders mature into successful students who have desires of their own to better themselves academically and behaviorally.

Additionally, Washington, D.C. has turned to ninth-grade academies and has also seen an increase in the number of ninth-grade students that were promoted from 47 percent in one year to 71 percent in the following year (Brown, 2013). Brown quotes the principal as saying "First-time ninth graders will have an opportunity to really sit in a class amongst their peers and not be influenced by someone taking the course for a second time, who may not be as positive" (2013).

The students have also commented on their excitement about being separated from older ninth graders, students that have repeated the ninth grade more than once (Brown, 2013). Brown (2013) also states that students, prior to the implementation on the ninth-grade academy, would not have responded well to the instruction given in the classroom to include completing and turning in projects. With ninth-grade academy in place, students are now more excited about completing their work and have a better chance of graduating (Brown, 2013).

As a matter of a fact, the Patterson, Beltyukova, Berman, and Francis (2007) research revealed that, in a Midwestern school, there were fewer suspensions, better attendance, and more students promoted to tenth grade as a result of a SLC program. McIntosh and White (2006) studied a school with a SLC program and found that students enjoyed their time with their cohort group and felt that the teachers cared about them. They also found that fewer students failed classes and a lower number of students were expelled from school (McIntosh and White, 2006). Retention rates and drop-out rates decreased in the years 2001-2007 per Cook, Fowler, and Harris (2008). Students showed academic gains when they were a part of a ninth-grade academy versus the traditional ninth-grade classroom, according to Styron and Peasant (2010):

Students enrolled in ninth-grade academies outperformed students in traditional high schools in Algebra I by more than 15 points on the subject area test. Ninth grade students enrolled in ninth-grade academies also scored nearly 25 points higher on the subject area test in Biology I. Both black and white students scored significantly better of each of the subjects than the traditional high school. (p.7)

According to Ruggeiro (2011), schools that implemented small learning communities had students that were more likely to report “feeling held to high academic standards than students in

traditional setting” (p.15). Kemple et al. (2015) suggest that small learning communities have been the most common and most effective response to the ninth-grade transitioning issues. Hardy (2006) discusses how a school system in St. Louis moved all of its ninth-grade students into a ninth-grade academy mid-year to solve many of the ninth-grade issues the school had been struggling with all year. Attendance was poor and the ninth-grade students were responsible for “three-quarters of the fights and other disciplinary infractions at the school” (Hardy, 2006, p. 20). Even though many of the students were not happy about a move in the middle of the school year, the administration felt it was necessary to make such a move at that time with hopes that a ninth-grade academy would begin to help their students eventually graduate (Hardy, 2006). Small learning communities—in this case, the ninth-grade academies—would help to focus on the needs of the students that were in jeopardy of failing or dropping out of high school (Hardy, 2006).

The nation’s capital has seen success with implementing ninth-grade academies into their school systems. According to Camera (2015), the number of students that successfully advanced to the tenth grade increased over the last two years, in the nation’s capital, because of the implementation of ninth-grade academies in the cities public schools. In three of the eight schools implementing ninth-grade academies in the District of Columbia, the number of ninth-grade students moving to tenth grade increased by 20 percent (Camera, 2015). In fact, Camera states that the total number of students successfully moving to tenth grade increased from 54 percent in the 2012-2013 school year to to 75 percent in the 2014-2015 school year, an overall increase of 18 percent (2015).

Shand (2014), an assistant principal of an urban/suburban high school, reports that ninth-grade academies helped decrease the discipline rates in his school between the 2006/2007 school

year to the 2009/2010 school year. His report shows the following:

Table 3

Ninth Grade Discipline Report (2006 – 2010 SY)

	2006/2007 SY	2007/2008 SY	2008/2009 SY	2009/2010 SY
Verbal Reprimand	341	211	267	271
Central Detention	167	148	98	124
In-School Suspension	626	440	407	320
Out-of-School Suspension	285	199	164	125
Expulsions	20	12	3	8
Arrests	34	17	16	24
# of school days	144	147	151	181

Note. Reprinted from: Shand, S. R. (2014). *The freshman academy report: Successes in a ninth-grade school-within-a-school model in an urban/suburban high school*, p. 7. Retrieved from:

http://www.whschools.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_2295901/File/Board%20of%20Education/Written%20Report%20on%20Freshman%20Academy.pdf

Jay Hertzog referred to this type of transition program as “hand holding,” but states that it is okay if it gets students to tenth grade because it is more likely that they will eventually graduate (Hardy, 2006). Ninth-grade academies offer so many strategies to help keep ninth-grade students from failing and/or dropping out of school such as personalization and rigorous and relevant instruction (Cook et al., 2008).

Concerns

Researchers in support of and/or against ninth-grade academies raise many questions

about the implementation of these programs. Those concerns are: where would funding for the program come from and would the program truly decrease drop-out and failure rates and decrease behavior issues for ninth grade students struggling to transition into high school. There were also concerns about whether there would be room to incorporate a ninth-grade academy program into the school at all. The concern about funding is particularly interesting. Holland and Mazzoli (2001) suggested that identifying and securing funding to continue the program is a challenge, in addition to identifying how many, if any, teachers would volunteer to work with the ninth graders. However, Camera (2015) suggests that implementing ninth-grade academies should not be costly since most of what is needed to implement the academy is already in place in most schools. District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) allocate a portion of their school's Title I funds specifically for their ninth-grade academy program (*DCPS FY17*, 2016). The allocation of the Title I funds is "exclusively used for staffing ninth-grade academy" and for supplies (*DCPS FY17*, 2016, p. 1).

Scheduling can also be a drawback: Jackson (2005) suggested that there was more diversity in classes offered to freshmen as the number of elective classes increased. It is difficult to work a schedule around a small number of students. These drawbacks needed resolution to accommodate the ninth-grade academy program. Schools that do not have ninth-grade academies do not have these drawbacks. Although these drawbacks are not issues for schools without ninth-grade academies, those schools have many other issues or drawbacks that outweigh the drawbacks suggested by Jackson.

McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) agree that there are disadvantages to ninth-grade academies although the intentions of the ninth-grade academy are good. One such disadvantage is teacher rivalry. It is thought that the ninth-grade academy teacher makes full commitments to

the ninth graders and not to the school as a whole (p. 452). In his blog, Habeeb (2009) discusses such disadvantages as bullying and ninth-grade students having limited elective course choices. Also, is the isolation necessary? Habeeb (2009) states that the isolation during ninth grade could be a problem as the ninth-grade students will still need to transition again once they are moved into the school tenth-grade year with all of the other students.

Many of these concerns relate to implementation of the ninth-grade academy. Camera (2015) notes that although there is no need for new teacher hires, it is difficult to implement the ninth-grade academy because it means realigning teachers and reconfiguring school facilities to keep the freshmen contained. Camera also states that often the start of the academy is met with excitement but that excitement soon dies (2015). According to a 2013 study of the 18 high schools that implemented ninth-grade academies in Broward County Florida, only three were implemented successfully (Camera, 2015).

Summary

Ninth-grade students struggle to transition into high school. This is evidenced by the decrease in academic achievement, increased failure rate, increased dropout rate, increased retention rate, and increased behavior problems. There is no “magic” answer for how to solve the ninth-grade transition problems, but several solutions have been offered. It is not completely understood how to address the transition problems ninth-grade students’ face, but research has been done to find a transitioning program that would assist ninth-grade students’ success. Research on many of the transition programs does not identify significant differences between what the transition program has to offer ninth-grade students vs. what the traditional ninth-grade classroom already offers. Somers and Garcia (2016) suggest that more research is needed to understand the implementation and effects ninth-grade academies have on student success. It is,

however, suggested that the smaller the environment for the transitioning student, the easier the transition into the environment. This study will hopefully offer support to the research that has already been done on the effects the ninth-grade academy has on students transitioning to high school. This causal comparative study of the effects of the ninth-grade academy on retention and office discipline referral rates will be an addition to what researchers have already posited as a need for solving the ninth-grade transition struggles of students entering high school.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This section describes the research methods used in this study. This section is organized into the following parts: (a) design, (b) research questions, (c) hypotheses, (d) participants and setting, (e) instrumentation, (f) procedures, (g) data analysis. The purpose of this causal comparative study was to determine if high retention rates and high office discipline referral rates could be reduced with the implementation of a ninth-grade academy program vs. a traditional ninth-grade program. The researcher chose to collect data from the 2014-2015 school year for this study.

Design

The research design for this study was a quantitative, causal-comparative study. A causal-comparative study allowed the researcher to identify associations among the variables. Specifically, this study sought to determine whether the independent variables, ninth-grade academy and traditional ninth-grade programs, had an effect on the dependent variables, retention rate and office discipline referral rate. According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012), the causal-comparative study design should include two groups that differ on some variable. In this study, the two groups differed in that each group was exposed to a different school program, ninth grade academy or traditional ninth grade program. An ex-post facto review of the collected data, retention rates and discipline referrals to administrators from the 2014-2015 school year was an important part of this quantitative process. Each of the high schools were studied to determine if the ninth-grade academy students showed any improvement from their exposure to the ninth-grade academy environment vs. no treatment at all (traditional ninth grade classes). An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant statistical

difference in the number of discipline referrals from teachers to administration and in grade level retention between the schools that implement ninth-grade academy and the schools that have a traditional ninth grade program. An independent samples *t*-test was used to compare the ninth-grade retention rate by both the ninth-grade academy and the traditional ninth-grade classroom program. The use of the independent *t*-test allowed the researcher to test the discipline referral to administration rate by the ninth-grade academy and by the traditional ninth-grade classroom program.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to determine if ninth-grade academies are one answer to the eighth grade to ninth grade transition struggles. Research supports the need for a transition program to assist ninth-grade students entering high school. Data was collected from the school system's Research, Assessments, Grants, and Accountability (RAGA) department for each of the participating schools' with conformation from the schools' counselors and administrators. The researcher attempted to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Is there a significant statistical difference in the retention rate of ninth grade students based on whether they enrolled or participated in the Ninth-Grade Academy or if they were enrolled in traditional ninth-grade classes?

RQ2: Is there a significant statistical difference in the number of Group A and Group B Offense discipline referrals to administration for ninth-grade students whether they enrolled or participated in the Ninth Grade Academy or if they were enrolled in traditional ninth-grade classes?

Hypotheses

These are the null hypotheses as related to the research questions that guided this study:

Ho1: There is no statistically significant difference in the retention rate of ninth-grade students based on the type of program they are exposed to (ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade classes).

Ho2: There is no statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals from teachers to administration based on the type of program the students are exposed to (ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade classes).

Participants and Setting

The district in which the study was conducted consists of 64,341 students. The percent of these students that attended school each day was 95.3 percent. The participants in this study consisted of all the ninth-grade students from four Title I schools. The students were divided into the number of male and female students. These students were first-time ninth grade students, which means none of these students had previously failed ninth grade.

The researcher conducted this research in the largest school system in the state of Alabama. This school system was chosen for this research because it is the school system that piloted the ninth-grade academy program as an answer to the ninth-grade problems, high ninth-grade retention rate and high office discipline referral rate that existed in the system. There are 12 high schools in this school system. Of the 12 high schools, four were chosen for this study. The four schools that were used in this study are all characteristically similar. All four schools have a predominantly African-American population, more than 90 percent. More than half of the population in all of the schools receives free or reduced lunch, which designates the schools as low-income schools. Two of the schools that data was collected from, School 1 and School 2, implement ninth-grade academy as its transitioning tool. The other two schools have no transitioning program in place and are operating as a traditional high school with traditional

ninth-grade classes.

The two schools implementing ninth-grade academy have special areas of the school building dedicated to the ninth grade, SLC, so that the students are not influenced by the upperclassmen in the building. Also, the ninth-grade academy in each of the two schools has an administrator specifically assigned to the academy and a select group of teachers that only teach students in the academy. The teachers in these two schools, however, did not volunteer to teach in the ninth-grade academy—they were assigned based on teacher units available to their school. Every ninth-grade student in the program was required to complete a leadership class through the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp (JROTC) program in addition to the other required courses. All of the ninth-grade core courses are offered in a special wing of the school to which only ninth-grade students have access. Parent contact is done in teams in the academy, meaning each time one teacher needs to contact a parent, all of the teachers that the student has classes with will also meet with that parent. The two schools that maintain the traditional ninth-grade classes function with administration that operates the entire school and teachers teach multiple grade levels of students. There are no special programs in place in these two schools to assist the ninth-grade students in any way.

All of the schools that were involved in this research operated under the block system. The block system consists of students being scheduled to complete full courses in a single semester, 18 weeks, instead of completing the course over the entire school year, August to May, 36 weeks. Two of the schools in this study have ninth-grade academies, School 1 and School 2 and the other two schools, School 3 and School 4, are traditional ninth grade programs. The total enrollment in school 1 was 923 students. There was a total of 183 ninth-grade students in School 1. The total enrollment in school 2 was 758 of which 145 were ninth-grade students. The total

enrollment in School 3 in 2014-2015 was 967 of which 221 were ninth-grade students. The enrollment in School 4 in 2014-2015 was 596 students of which 130 were ninth-grade students. Student-teacher ratio in two of the participating schools was very similar: in School 1, 16 students per full time equivalent (FTE) teacher, and in School 2, 18 students per FTE teacher. The student-teacher ratios in Schools 3 and 4 were also similar: School 3 had 17 students per FTE, School 4 had 16 students per FTE.

Instrumentation

This study was ex post facto because the necessary data needed for this research had been previously collected but not for research purposes. Also, the independent variable for this study was present prior to the study taking place allowing the researcher to determine how it affected the dependent variable without altering the participants involved in the study. Because this was an ex post facto study, all data was collected from the school system archives after the 2014-2015 school year ended. This data consisted of how many true ninth grade students were enrolled in the school, how many ninth-grade students were retained in that year, and how many Group A and Group B offense office discipline referrals were written for ninth-grade students in that year. The Group A offenses consist of such behaviors as excessive talking in class, and non-participation in class (see Appendix D). The Group B offenses consist of such behaviors as leaving the classroom or campus without permission and skipping class (see Appendix D). Permission to collect said data from the school district was obtained from the Mobile County Schools System Research, Assessment, Grants, and Accountability (RAGA) supervisor. The RAGA Department's Data and School System Research Specialist, collected and provided the necessary data for this study. All student names and identifiers were removed from the student files before being provided to the researcher. This study did not identify any student by name or

divulge any students' identity during the course of this research. Confirmation of collected data was gleaned from the counselors at each of the four schools.

Procedures

The process that was used to collect the data for this research consisted of gaining permission to collect the data, from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the school superintendent of the school system in which the schools in the study reside, and from each of the four schools' administrators. A research application was submitted to the IRB to gain approval to conduct this research and approval was granted. A letter was drafted to the school system superintendent requesting permission to conduct this study. A letter was also drafted to each of the administrators requesting permission to collect data from their records for the 2014-2015 school year. After gaining permission to collect data from all necessary institutions, the researcher then contacted the school system data specialist that was assigned to assist the researcher, to glean the data from the school system data base. The ninth-grade counselors from each school were also contacted to collect follow up data so that a comparison could be made to the data collected from the system data base. Each of the ninth-grade program school counselors were asked to complete a form in reference to their school's ninth grade academy program to determine that each school's program was similar (see Appendix E). The researcher also discussed with the counselor the necessity of collecting the data (number of true ninth-grade students enrolled, number of ninth-grade students retained, and number of discipline referrals written for ninth-grade students) and gained permission to assist the counselor in retrieving the data from records. Data collection took place over a period of one week. The data was collected from each school for the 2014-2015 school year. The data was also separated by school: School One and Two were the schools that were implementing a true ninth-grade academy. These two

schools were exposed to the program identified as the one that addresses the issue of ninth-grade retention and ninth grade discipline referrals written to administration. School Three and School Four were the schools that were implementing the traditional ninth-grade program. These two schools, School Three and School Four, did not have exposure to any special programs to address the ninth-grade retention rate and ninth-grade discipline referrals to administration.

Data Analysis

An independent samples *t*-test was used to analyze the data from this research. The researcher chose this method of data analysis to determine if a relationship existed between the independent and dependent variables (Salkind, 2010). The specific relationship that the researcher sought was one in that the independent variable impacted the dependent variable after an event has taken place, in this instance ninth-grade academy had already been implemented in the schools (Salkind, 2010). The data were collected and the *t*-test was conducted using SPSS statistics. The *t*-test tested each of the two independent variables, ninth-grade academy and the traditional ninth-grade program, with one of each of the dependent variables at a time, grade level retention rate and number of Group A and B discipline referrals written to administration.

H₀₁: There is no statistically significant difference in the retention rate of ninth-grade students based on the type of program they are exposed to (ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade classes).

The assumption for the *t*-test for retention rate was that the variables, ninth-grade academy and retention rate, were dependent. A Chi square test was conducted to determine the association between the independent variables ninth-grade academy and traditional ninth-grade classes and whether the student was retained (dependent variable) or not (yes/no). The researcher chose this method of data analysis because of the nature of the data—categorical

data. This test allowed the researcher to determine whether to accept or reject the null hypothesis based on whether the variables were independent of each other.

H₀₂: There is no statistically significant difference in the number of Group A and Group B offense discipline referrals from teachers to administration based on the type of program the students are exposed to (ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade classes)

The assumption for the *t*-test for the Group A and Group B offense office discipline referrals was that the plotted data would result in a normal distribution—bell shaped curve (normality assumption)—using a Histogram. Once the data was determined abnormal, a nonparametric test, Mann Whitney U test, was conducted to determine whether the null hypothesis should be accepted or rejected. The researcher collected the data and the assumptions tests were conducted using SPSS statistics. Due to no statistically significant difference in the dependent variables based on program exposure, an effect size calculation was not necessary.

There was also the assumption that there were no outliers in the analyzed data. The *t*-test data screening consisted of a Box and Whisker plot to determine if there were any outliers. SPSS was also used to determine if there were any significant outliers in the data. One significant outlier was found but removing said outlier did not change whether there was a statistical significant difference in the dependent variables based on the independent variables.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter covers the findings of the data analysis conducted and reviewed for this research. The purpose of this study was to determine if ninth-grade academies are an answer to the transition struggles eighth-grade students have as they graduate into high school. This chapter is organized into the following sections, research questions, null hypotheses, descriptive statistics, and results.

Research Questions

RQ1: Is there a significant statistical difference in the retention rate of ninth grade students based on whether they enrolled or participated in the Ninth-Grade Academy or if they were enrolled in traditional ninth-grade classes?

RQ2: Is there a significant statistical difference in the number of Group A and Group B offense discipline referrals to administration for ninth-grade students whether they enrolled or participated in the Ninth Grade Academy or if they were enrolled in traditional ninth-grade classes?

Null Hypotheses

These are the null hypotheses as related to the research questions that guided this study:

Ho1: There is no statistically significant difference in the retention rate of ninth-grade students based on the type of program they are exposed to (ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade classes).

Ho2: There is no statistically significant difference in the number of Group A and Group B offense discipline referrals from teachers to administration based on the type of program the students are exposed to (ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade classes).

Descriptive Statistics

The independent variables for this study were ninth grade academy and traditional ninth-grade program. Table 4 and Figure 1 display a breakdown by gender of participants that were exposed to each of the independent variables. The dependent variables for this study were grade level retention rate and Group A and B offense discipline referrals to administration. Tables 5 and 6, respectively, display a breakdown of the Group A and Group B offense discipline referrals to administration. Figure 2 displays a breakdown of the students' retention rate based on program exposure.

Table 4

Gender by Program

	Program	
	Ninth-grade academy	Traditional
Male	159	184
Female	169	167
Total	328	351

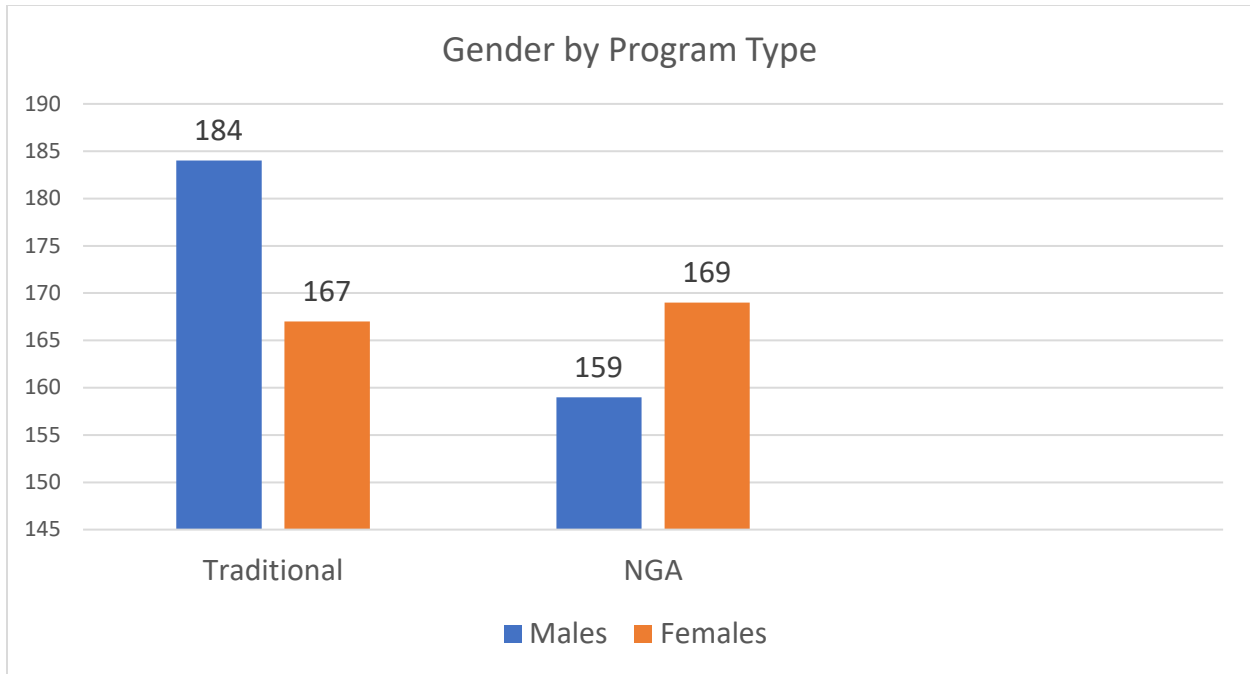


Figure 1. Gender by program, $N = 679$.

Table 5

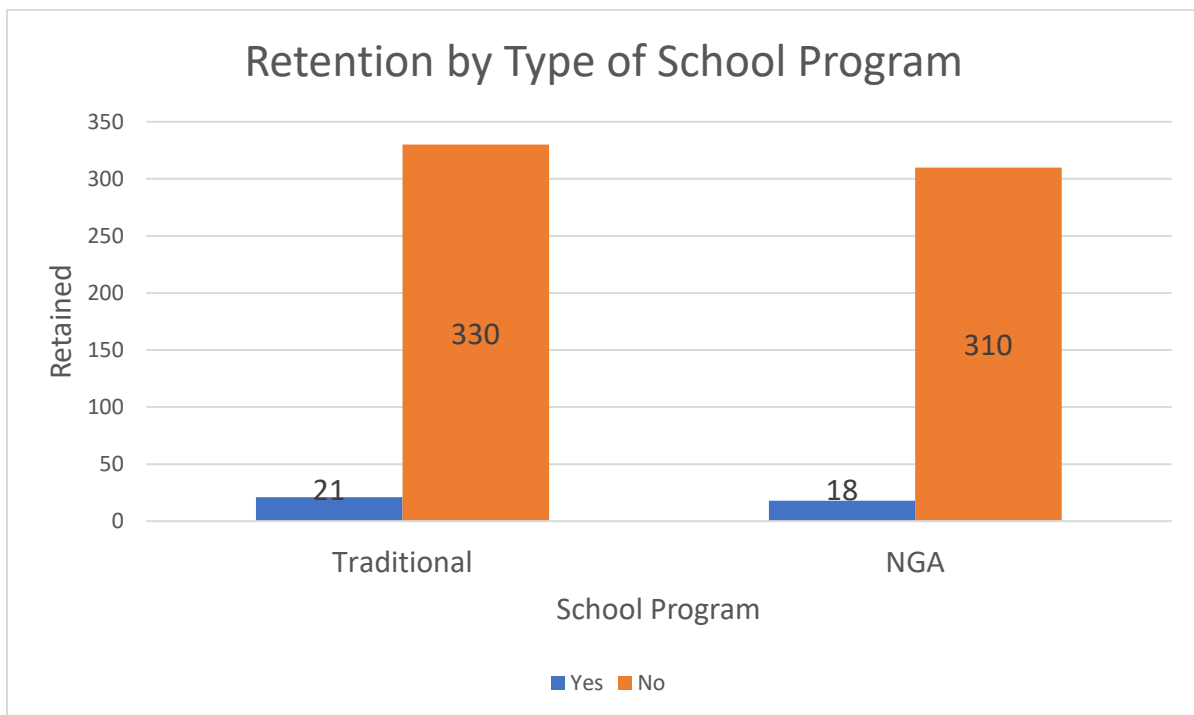
Group A Offenses

Number of reported offenses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	624	91.9	91.9
1	48	7.1	99.0
2	5	.7	99.7
3	2	.3	100.0
Total	679	100.0	

Table 6

Group B Offenses

Number of reported offenses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	484	71.3	71.3
1	106	15.6	86.9
2	42	6.2	93.1
3	15	2.2	95.3
4	12	1.8	97.1
5	7	1.0	98.1
6	5	.7	98.8
7	2	.3	99.1
8	4	.6	99.7
9	1	.1	99.9
12	1	.1	100.0
Total	679	100.0	

*Figure 2.* Retention based on program exposure.

Results

Quantitative Analyses

RQ1. Is there a significant statistical difference in the retention rate of ninth grade students based on whether they enrolled or participated in the Ninth-Grade Academy or if they were enrolled in traditional ninth-grade classes?

H₀₁: There is no significant statistical difference in the retention rate of ninth-grade students based on the type of program they are exposed to (ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade classes).

Research question one consisted of two dichotomous variables, type of program (ninth grade academy/traditional) and whether the student was retained (yes/no). A Chi-square analysis was used to determine the association and independence of observations of retention and the type of program a student was enrolled in. Expected cell frequencies were examined to determine whether any expected frequencies were less than 5; the smallest expected cell frequency was 18.84. Of the 328 students in the ninth-grade academy program, 21 students (6.4 percent) were retained; of the 351 students enrolled in the traditional program, 18 were retained (5.1 percent). This does not represent a significant association between retention and the type of program and the variables are independent of one another. $\chi^2 (1) = .077, p = .782$. The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis because there is no significant statistical difference in the retention rate of ninth-grade students based on the type of program they are exposed to (ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade classes). Table 7 represents the Chi-square test statistics.

Table 7

Chi-Square Test Statistics

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Approximate Significance
Pearson Chi-Square	.077	1	.782	
Nominal by Nominal (Phi)	-.011			.782
N	679			

RQ2. Is there a significant statistical difference in the number of Group A and Group B offense discipline referrals to administration for ninth-grade students whether they enrolled or participated in the Ninth Grade Academy or if they were enrolled in traditional ninth-grade classes?

Ho2: There is no significant statistical difference in the number of discipline referrals from teachers to administration based on the type of program the students are exposed to (ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade classes).

Upon reviewing the histogram for the dependent variables, number of referrals, both referral types (A and B) were determined to not have normal distributions. A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality confirmed both A and B offenses were significantly not normal; Group A: $D(679) = .527, p < .001$; Group B: $D(679) = .385, p < .001$. Therefore, the nonparametric Mann-Whitney was used to address research question two for determining differences in offenses between the type of program (ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade). Figure 3 represents the distribution for the number of Group A offenses. Figure 4 represents the distribution for the number of Group B offenses.

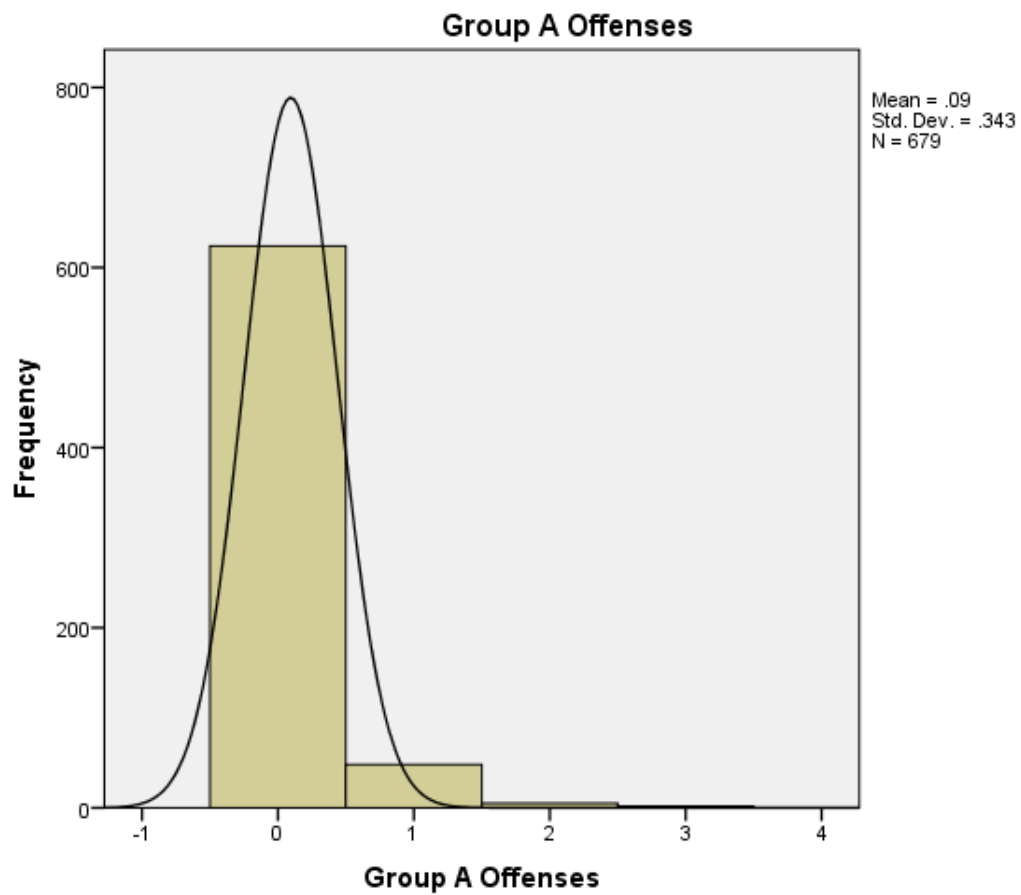


Figure 3. Distribution of group A offenses.

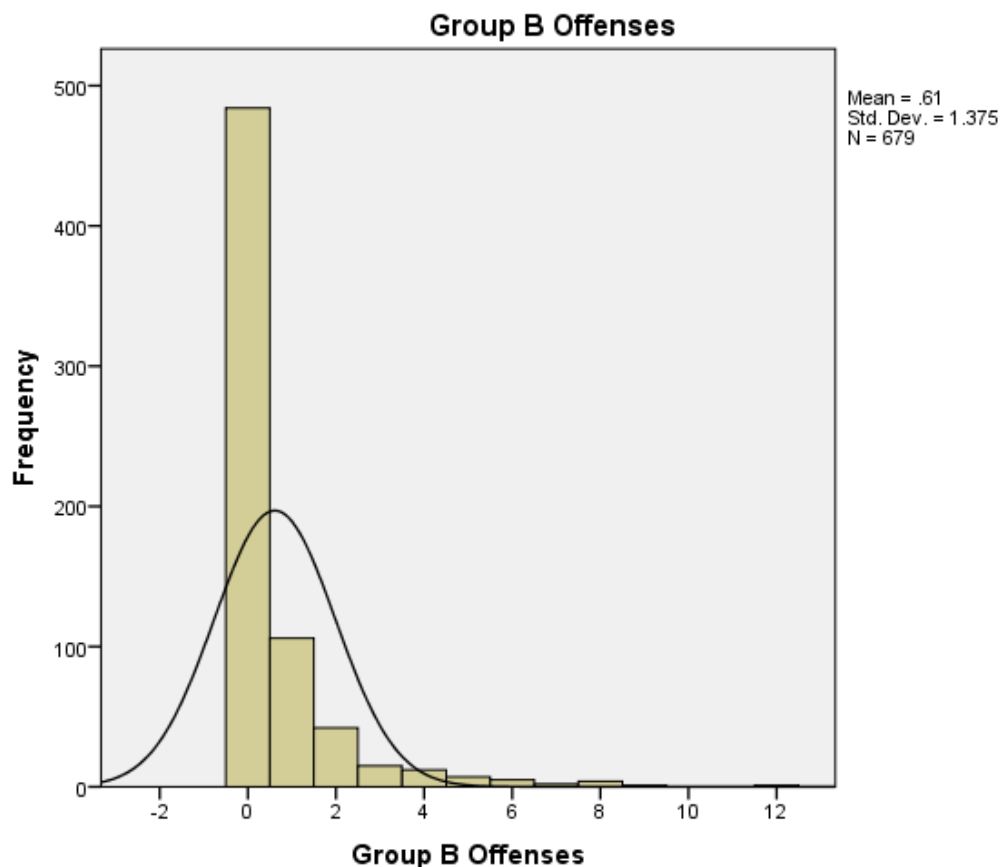


Figure 4. Distribution of group B offenses.

Figure 5 represents the Box and Whisker plot of Group A and Group B offenses. Participant number 509, with 12 group B offenses, was an extreme outlier. However, upon removal of this outlier, the distribution was still not normal. If all outliers were removed from the plot, the sample would have been reduced by 4.4percent. There appeared to be no input errors and the variability in the data cannot be attributed to instrumentation or participant error, therefore it was not reasonable to remove outliers.

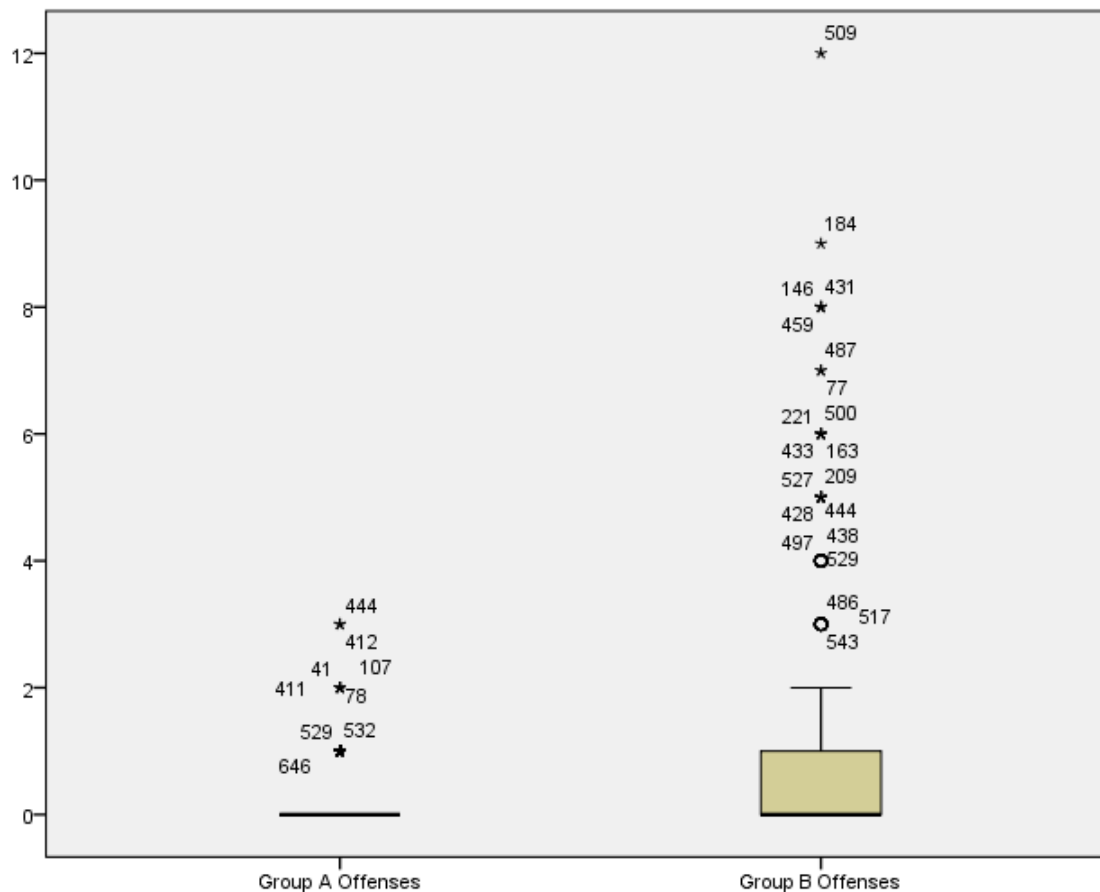


Figure 5. Box-Whisker plot of group A and B offenses.

Table 8 represents the descriptive and test statistics for group offenses by program. The number of group A offenses for ninth-grade academy students ($Mdn = .00$) did not differ significantly from the traditional ninth-grade students ($Mdn = .00$), $U = 55686.50$, $z = -1.56$, $p = .120$. The number of group B offenses for ninth-grade academy students ($Mdn = .00$) did not differ significantly from the traditional ninth-grade students ($Mdn = .00$), $U = 54140.50$, $z = -1.68$, $p = .092$. The null hypothesis cannot be rejected because there are no significant statistical differences in the number of discipline referrals from teachers to administration based on the type of program the students are exposed to (ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade classes).

Table 8

Descriptive and Test Statistics For Group Offenses By Program

	Mean	SD	Median	Z	Significance (2-tailed)
Group A offenses				-1.56	.120
Ninth-grade academy	.08	.341	.00		
Traditional	.11	.346	.00		
Group B offenses				-1.68	.092
Ninth-grade academy	.67	1.46	.00		
Traditional	.55	1.286	.00		

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

The purpose of this causal-comparative study was to ascertain if ninth-grade academies are an answer to solving the high grade-level retention rate and the numerous discipline referrals, Group A and B, made to administrators for ninth-grade students. Ninth-grade academies have been implemented in school systems across the nation with the hope of easing the transition issues of many ninth-grade students as they enter high school. With effective implementation, successes have been seen as evidenced by decreases in grade level retention rates, drop-out rates, office discipline referral rates, and increases in attendance and academic scores. In Chapter Five, the researcher draws conclusions from this research and refers to previous research in this area to offer recommendations for future research on ninth-grade academies.

Discussion

This study and its findings show that there is no statistically significant difference in the students' retention rate and in their Group A or B offense discipline referral rate based on program exposure, ninth-grade academy versus a traditional ninth-grade program. The Chi-square test that was conducted on the programs' effects on retention rate yielded a p value of .782. This value means the researcher failed to reject the null; there was no statistical significant difference in the retention rate of students that were exposed to the ninth-grade academy versus students that were exposed to the traditional ninth-grade classes. Because the Group A and B offense discipline referrals to administration results were determined to be non-normal, a Mann Whitney U test was conducted and the results failed to reject the null hypothesis. These results mean there was no statistically significant difference in the effects of the independent variable, ninth-grade academy, on the office discipline referral rate. It is this researcher's opinion that if

all of the necessary components were in place that are necessary for student success in a ninth-grade academy, the results of this study would have shown a statistical significant difference in the independent variables. McIntosh & White (2006) suggest that those necessary components for ninth-grade academy success are: (a) the academy must have its own core teachers, principal, counselor, and student lockers located within the academy, (b) teachers within the academy should share the same cohort of students, (c) common planning time so that the core teachers can collaborate on interventions for students who are at-risk, plan student activities, and develop communities of professional learning, (d) freshman counselor collaborating with the middle school counselor to make sure that students are placed in the proper freshman courses, (e) freshmen all on the same lunch wave with all freshmen teachers, (f) special activities to take place specifically on freshman lunch wave, (g) pure freshman homerooms, (h) each freshman homeroom should have a student council representative, (i) freshman teacher annual retreat time to plan, bond, and develop common practices, (j) specific stakeholders (principal, counselor, an intervention teacher) to remain with the freshman academy every year and not move to the next class when the students move, (k) developed and improved eight grade transition activities, (l) a freshman orientation that lasts for three hours during the month of August.

Null Hypothesis One

H₀1: There is no statistically significant difference in the retention rate of ninth-grade students based on the type of program they are exposed to (ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade classes). This null hypothesis looked at the relationship between program type, ninth-grade academy/traditional ninth-grade classes, and retention, yes/no. Understanding that School 1 and School 2 both implemented ninth-grade academies but neither of the two schools incorporated all of the necessary components previously suggested by McIntosh & White (2006)

helped the researcher to understand why no statistically significant difference was found between the two variables. According to Maxwell et al., (2014) there is evidence that ninth-grade academies can be effective in reducing retention rates. McIntosh & White's 12 strategies for a successful ninth-grade academy are necessary to show the proposed statistical significant difference in retention rate and office discipline referral rate based on program exposure (2006). The results of this study challenge the results of previously conducted studies that have shown positive results from the implementation of ninth-grade academies.

Null Hypothesis Two

Ho2: There is no statistically significant difference in the number of Group A and Group B offense discipline referrals from teachers to administration based on the type of program the students are exposed to (ninth-grade academy or traditional ninth-grade classes). This null hypothesis looked at the relationship between ninth-grade academy and traditional ninth-grade program's impact on Group A and Group B offense office discipline referrals to administration. This study did not find that there was a statistically significant difference in the two types of offenses based on program exposure. Disruptive behavior is a major concern for students that are entering high school. Ford (2015) postulates that disruptive behavior interferes with the educational process of individual students and the class as a whole (p. ii). However, Veasey (2011) revealed, through her research, that one school district in Georgia saw a reduction in discipline referrals by 55 %, six years after implementing a ninth-grade academy in one of its high schools. Knowing that there are successes with effective implementation of ninth-grade academy for discipline issues means this study's results contradict what other studies have shown.

Implications

The first implication of this study is that district support was available in the way of funding due to the ninth-grade academy program being a district-wide implementation. Lack of funding has been a concern for school systems that implement ninth-grade academy programs in their schools. Holland and Mazzoli (2001) suggested that identifying and securing funding to continue the ninth-grade program is a challenge. However, Camera (2015) suggests that implementing ninth-grade academies should not be costly since most of what is needed to implement the academy is already in place in most schools. Without funding for additional teacher and administrator units, restructuring of buildings, and providing special activities such as summer bridge programs, implementing a ninth-grade academy may not have the expected successes suggested by Dedmond (2006), Nola-Ganey (2007), Mullis (2009), Bennett (2012), and Maxwell et al. (2014). Many teachers and administrators feel that if a program is implemented in the school system, financial support is a part of that implementation. As this study has revealed that there is no statistically significant difference in the retention rate and the Group A and B offense office discipline referral rate, it supports Letgers, et al., (2013) and McIntosh & White's (2006) suggestions that (a) the academy must have its own core teachers, principal, counselor, and student lockers located within the academy, (b) teachers within the academy should share the same cohort of students, and they must have (c) common planning time so that the core teachers can collaborate on interventions for students who are at-risk, plan student activities, and develop communities of professional learning, (d) a freshman counselor collaborating with the middle school counselor to make sure that students are placed in the proper freshman courses, (e) freshmen all on the same lunch wave with all freshmen teachers, (f) special activities to take place specifically on freshman lunch wave, (g) pure freshman homerooms, (h) each freshman homeroom with a student council representative, (i) freshman

teacher annual retreat time to plan, bond, and develop common practices, (j) specific stakeholders (principal, counselor, an intervention teacher) to remain with the freshman academy every year and not move to the next class when the students move, (k) developed and improved eighth grade transition activities, and finally, (l) a freshman orientation that lasts for three hours during the month of August. All must be in place for student success in a ninth-grade academy.

The major implication in this study is that Skinner's research was able to demonstrate that reinforced behaviors will be repeated (McLeod, 2015). This would mean that based on ninth-grade academy successes, more students should advance through high school to on time graduation (low grade level retention) and have less office discipline referrals to administration. Because this was not the result of this study, it is thought that the ninth-grade academy program is not an answer to decreasing grade level retention and the office discipline referral rate.

Limitations

Limitations for this study include the fact that data collected may have included students that were not first time ninth-grade students due to possible inaccurate records being kept. With all effort to exclude the students that are not first time ninth grade students, many times student data "falls through the cracks" and the student is labeled as a first time ninth grade student. Students are also classified as ninth-grade students because they were unable to maintain their grades and therefore did not receive enough credits to be classified as a tenth-grade student or sophomore. Because the independent variable, ninth grade academy, is intended to minimize such situations, then the data may be distorted or biased in meaning. This could possibly threaten the internal validity of this study. Also, often accurate discipline and retention records are not kept and this could possibly distort the data collected.

Another limitation to this study is the fact that the two schools that implemented a ninth-

grade academy program did not have all the necessary components suggested by McIntosh & White (2006) to implement an effective ninth-grade academy program. A program fidelity form was created and completed by the school counselors of the two schools implementing a ninth-grade academy to determine if the schools were implementing the program in a comparable manner. Although each of the two schools were implementing the ninth-grade academy, each school had at least one necessary component of the academy that was not being implemented. For example, neither of the two schools implementing ninth-grade academy had an administrator that only worked with ninth-grade students. Also, not all of the ninth-grade classes in those schools consisted of only true ninth-grade students, no repeaters. The results of this study determined that there was not a statistically significant difference in the retention rate and in the Group A and B offense discipline referrals to administration. This may be due to the incomplete implementation of the ninth-grade academy program.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study are reported as nonconclusive, suggesting that there are possibly additional hypotheses to test. The first question suggested for future research is whether ninth-grade academies have a statistically significant difference in retention rate and office discipline referrals in a more diverse school environment. The recommendation is to replicate the procedures of this study in a more diverse school setting to determine if there will be a statistically significant difference based on the racial make-up of the students in the school.

The second question is whether or not these findings would be different if this study were conducted in a more affluent school system. As funding is necessary for ninth-grade academy program success, replicating this study in a school district that has the funds to support the program could show a statistically significant difference in the results of the same study. The

recommendation is to replicate this study in a K-12 school district that is implementing ninth-grade academy programs in their school system with the funding to provide all of the necessary components of the ninth-grade academy.

Conclusion

Research supports transition programs to assist students transitioning into high school. Ninth-grade academies have been successful in decreasing drop-out rates, high grade-level retention rates, and office discipline referral rates, therefore increasing on time graduation rates. As there has been much research on the effectiveness of ninth-grade academy as an answer to ninth-grade transition struggles, many times funding is not added to the programs that have seen success. This researcher also feels that many times data is collected for implemented programs but not analyzed to determine effectiveness. With replications of previous studies, with analyzed data from effective program implementations, and with funding to maintain the academy with all of the suggested components from successful research studies, ninth-grade academy can be a true and positive program to making ninth-grade students successful in their transition to high school.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Research Proposal Request

Dr. Susan Hinton,

My name is Ursula Martin. I am currently working on a Doctorate degree in Education with a concentration on Curriculum and Instruction at Liberty University. I am making a request to be able to conduct research in the school district. My research title is Ninth-Grade Academy: Is It the Answer to Unsuccessful Eighth Grade to Ninth-Grade Transition. I believe that this study will offer information to the school district that will help to effectively decrease both the ninth-grade retention rate and the discipline referrals to administration. Attached is a copy of my purpose of study, problem statement, significance of study and research questions. If more information is needed, please let me know so that I can submit what is needed.

Thank you in advance,

Ursula Martin, Ed.S.

Appendix B: Data Collection Letter

May 16, 2016

Administrators and Counselors,

My name is Ursula Martin. I am currently a technology resource teacher (TRT) for the Mobile County Public Schools System. I am working to complete my doctorate degree at Liberty University and I need your assistance. My research topic is Ninth Grade Academy: Is It the Answer to Unsuccessful Eighth Grade to Ninth Grade Transition.

I gained the approval to conduct this research in the district from the school system's Executive Director of Research, Assessment, Grants & Accountability, Dr. Susan Hinton. I am asking you, if possible, to provide me with specific data to assist me in the completion of my research.

1. Do you consider your schools Ninth Grade Academy to be a true academy? (This means you have all of the tools necessary to accommodate the ninth graders the way the academy guidelines specify: separate administrator, all courses in a separated wing or area of the school, etc.)
_____.

2. What was the student-teacher ratio in your school in the 2014-2015 school year?
_____.

Thank you so much for your assistance. I intend to report my findings to the district.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me by phone at (251) 623-6963 (cell) or by email at udmartin@liberty.edu. Please return the requested information to me in the self-addressed, stamped envelope provided.

Thank you again for your assistance,

Ursula Martin, Ed.S.

Appendix C: Data Collection Letter

January 1, 2018

Dr. Hinton,

As part of the research I am conducting in the district I am requesting the following data be extracted (raw data). Totals can be submitted here and raw data can be emailed to me at the email address listed at the bottom of this form:

1. How many pure ninth graders were enrolled in your school in the 2014-2015 school year?
(number of ninth grade students that entered the ninth grade for the first time)
 - a. Blount High School _____ male _____ female _____
 - b. Vigor High School _____ male _____ female _____
 - c. LeFlore High school _____ male _____ female _____
 - d. Williamson High School _____ male _____ female _____

2. How many of your pure ninth graders were retained at the end of the 2014-2015 school year?
 - a. Blount High School _____ male _____ female _____
 - b. Vigor High School _____ male _____ female _____
 - c. LeFlore High school _____ male _____ female _____
 - d. Williamson High School _____ male _____ female _____

3. How many pure ninth grader Group A Offense discipline referrals were submitted to administrators during the 2014-2015 school year?
 - a. Blount High School _____ male _____ female _____
 - b. Vigor High School _____ male _____ female _____
 - c. LeFlore High school _____ male _____ female _____
 - d. Williamson High School _____ male _____ female _____

4. How many pure ninth grader Group B Offense discipline referrals were submitted to administrators during the 2014-2015 school year?
 - a. Blount High School _____ male _____ female _____
 - b. Vigor High School _____ male _____ female _____
 - c. LeFlore High school _____ male _____ female _____
 - d. Williamson High School _____ male _____ female _____

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me by phone at (251) 623-6963 (cell) or by email at udmartin@liberty.edu. Please return the requested information to me via email or in the self-addressed, stamped envelope provided.

Thank you,

Ursula Martin, Ed.S.

Appendix D: Discipline Referral Codes

<i>Group A Offenses</i>	<i>Group B Offenses</i>
1. Excessive talking in class	1. Leaving the classroom or campus without permission
2. Cheating/ or copying the work of other students	2. Acts of physical aggression
3. Minor acts of disobedience	3. Truancy
4. Being improperly dressed or out of approved uniform	4. Class cutting, skipping
5. Minor misbehaviors on the school bus (see glossary)	5. Acts of willful disobedience
6. Public display of physical affection	6. Usage of electronic devices including communication and emerging technologies - While on campus, electronic devices shall be powered off and stored away until the dismissal bell rings.
7. Non-participation in class: no books, materials, etc.	7. Possessing, selling, furnishing, giving away, distributing, transferring, or obtaining commercial fireworks
8. Misuse of lunch card/identification number	8. Possessing, selling, furnishing, giving away, distributing, transferring, or obtaining a realistic toy, replica, or look-a- like gun
9. Possessing of nuisance items as defined by principal (such as fake items: snakes, spiders, etc.)	9. Using aggressive obscene/profane language- whether spoken, written or by gestures. Including verbal confrontation
10. Tardiness to class and /or school	10. Possessing and /or using tobacco products or electronic cigarettes and related product and/or devices
11. Infractions that are minor in nature and disrupt the orderly educational process	

Note. From Mobile County Public Schools System 2014-2015 school system code of conduct.

Appendix E: Program Fidelity Form

Directions: Please circle a number indicating how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Ninth-grade academy students are all scheduled in the same classes (take all classes from academy teachers).	1	2	3	4	5
2. Ninth-grade academy classes consists of only first time ninth-grade students (no repeaters)	1	2	3	4	5
3. Ninth-grade academy classes are all in a specified wing or separate building on campus.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Ninth-grade academy students have the same lunch wave.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Ninth-grade academy students are required to complete a freshman success course (Freshman 101).	1	2	3	4	5
6. Ninth-grade academy administrator only works with ninth-grade students.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Ninth-grade academy has a counselor that only supports ninth-grade students.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Ninth-grade academy teachers volunteered to work in the academy.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Ninth-grade academy teachers have common planning time.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Ninth-grade academy students are offered activities that support their successful transitioning (awards days, student of the week, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
11. Incoming ninth-grade academy students participated in a summer bridge program.	1	2	3	4	5

Additional comments:

Appendix F: IRB Approval Letter**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 8, 2018

Ursula Martin

IRB Application 3167: Ninth-Grade Academy: Is It the Answer to Unsuccessful Eighth Grade to Ninth Grade Transition

Dear Ursula Martin,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study does not classify as human subjects research. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Your study does not classify as human subjects research because it will not involve the collection of identifiable, private information.

Please note that this decision only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by submitting a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Application number.

If you have any questions about this determination or need assistance in identifying whether possible changes to your protocol would change your application's status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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