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# Bridging The Transition From Middle School To High School

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Bridging The Transition From Middle School To High School

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### **Abstract**

This study is a records review of students ( $N = 1122$ ) enrolled in a suburban Northeastern United States high school, in which, the researcher documented student grades, number of behavioral incidents, and days absent during their eighth and ninth grade years at ten-week intervals. Four cohorts of freshmen were selected for this study in order to identify trends that occurred over the transition from middle school to high school. The school selected for this study implemented Peer Mentoring, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Teams, and a Freshman Orientation to aid the transition into high school. The following research analyzes whether there are significant changes observed as students adjust to the often challenging transition into high school. Descriptive statistics test analyses were run to determine the average eighth and ninth grade GPA, attendance, rates, and behavioral incidents for each cohort. In addition, an independent samples t-test was run in order to compare any significant results between the 2012 cohort and the past three cohorts. Significant findings were observed in the 2012 cohort, who experienced the lowest absence rates of all cohorts studied.

### **Bridging the Transition From Middle School To High School**

The transition to high school is a pivotal time developmentally in which successes and failures can strongly impact whether students will rise up to meet challenges or fall behind and never catch up (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cooney & Bottoms, 2002). Research has found that students, who experience a positive transition and successful freshman year, are more likely to stay in school and go on to graduate (McIntosh & White, 2006). If an adolescent, however, does not make a successful transition into high school and they fail to catch up, they are more likely to become discouraged and eventually drop out of school (Cooney & Bottoms, 2002). Students have primarily reported three major concern areas in their transition to high school: social, academic, and procedural challenges (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cushman, 2006; Mizelle, 2005).

School counselors are essential resources for students in transition (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). Counselors collaborate with resources within and outside of school to overcome student challenges and identify strategies for students to be successful. School counselors also have a supportive role in times of transition as they are able to analyze student data and identify areas of need (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). Counselors are able to implement necessary transition programming to ease the transition to high school and promote student success.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the changes experienced over the transition from middle school to high school as observed in students' grades, attendance rates, and number of behavioral incidents. The objective is to observe trends in the data in order to advocate for increased transition programming. The research questions are: After participating in transitional programming, is there an impact on:

1. 9<sup>th</sup> grade student attendance rates?

2. 9<sup>th</sup> grade student behavioral incidents?
3. 9<sup>th</sup> grade student grades?

The topic of freshman transition is significant to the field of school counseling due to the negative implications (such as failing to graduate) if students do not make a successful transition. The role of school counselors includes ensuring that all students graduate from high school prepared for college and careers (ASCA, 2005). Research shows that students who do not make a successful transition into high school are at greater risk of failing to graduate.

The present research took place at one single suburban high school; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the population. The researcher analyzed the student records of all current students who had started attending the high school in their freshman year. Data from students who had transferred out of the high school was not included in this study. In addition, demographic information to further analyze the findings was not collected.

Regarding ethical considerations, the current study analyzed personal student records of middle and high school students; therefore, confidentiality to protect the students from being identified was a primary consideration in the research. In order to maintain confidentiality, the researcher kept all data in student spreadsheets anonymous, categorized by current grade so that students could not be identified.

### **Review of the Literature**

The high school transition presents unique challenges that middle school students are not used to dealing with, such as challenging coursework, increased expectations from adults, social pressures, and notably the pressure to make a decision about post-secondary plans (Akos & Galassi, 2004). High school is a time when many ninth graders find themselves lost in an unfamiliar, less personal environment, struggling to keep up with the demanding coursework that was not as present in middle school. Overall, students reported three main areas of concern during their transition to high school: social, academic, and procedural (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cushman, 2006; Mizelle, 2005). Social concerns had to do with worrying about being bullied in high school, making new friends, and fitting in. Academic concerns were the most prominent and these worries were about adapting to the increasingly challenging high school courses and greater workload. Finally, the procedural concerns were about becoming familiar with the new, complex high school building and the structure of a student's new schedule with multiple classes and teachers (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

School counselors' expertise positions them to be essential resources to students, especially during times of transition (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has created a national framework for comprehensive school counseling that includes best practices for supporting student needs. ASCA states that school counselors should work to help students in the academic, personal/social, and career domains (ASCA, 2005). School transitions can present a variety of challenges in all three areas. High school counselors are able to improve the shift from middle to high school by analyzing student data to find students at risk and areas of need (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). Counselors can collaborate with other school staff, parents, and the community to implement individual or group interventions to



combat student challenges. School counselors are responsible for advocating for students' needs, reducing barriers to success, and identifying strategies to help students succeed in all three domains. If students receive support through their school transition, they are much more likely to succeed in high school and successfully navigate future life transitions (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Times of transition are pivotal turning points in an individual's life; and school counselors are needed to support students through their challenges and create the strongest foundation possible for success.

### **Defining The Ninth Grade Problem**

Ninth grade is a critical year that can make or break a student's high school experience. The pivotal freshman year often determines which students will graduate and those who will drop out of high school (Cooney & Bottoms, 2004; McIntosh & White, 2006). If a student has a successful year, they are more likely to enjoy the schooling experience and stay in school (McIntosh & White, 2006); if a student has a rough experience during their freshman year, however, they are more likely to eventually make the decision to drop out. The majority of students who become discouraged during their freshman year and give up on school never catch up (Cooney & Bottoms, 2002).

**Ninth grade bulge.** The ninth grade bulge, or "bottleneck", describes the high enrollment of 9<sup>th</sup> grade due to new incoming students and older students, who failed to earn enough credits to move on to tenth grade (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Ninth grade enrollment is continually increasing as tenth grade enrollment dips, and these realities are the most prominent for Hispanic and African-American students (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). From 1996-2003, Hispanic and African-American students were over twice as likely as white peers to have to

repeat ninth grade, and ninth grade males were twice as likely as females to be held back (Black, 2004). On average, ninth grade retention rates are three to five times higher than previous grades, which can ultimately lead to higher rates of high school dropout (Cooney & Bottoms, 2002). In the past decade, statewide attrition rates from grade 9 to grade 10 had increased dramatically and graduation rates had significantly dropped (Haney, 2003). Furthermore, it was estimated that between 70-80% of students, who do not get promoted to tenth grade, will eventually drop out of high school (Black, 2004). Urban students face the most challenging obstacles, where only half of the 9th graders are expected to graduate in four years (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

**Ninth grade relationship with dropout rates.** About one-third of students, who dropped out of high school nationwide, were never promoted beyond ninth grade. Students from Chicago Public Schools, who fell off the graduation path in ninth grade, had a 22% chance of graduating on time. Students, who were on track to graduate, had an 81% chance of finishing high school in four years (Neild, 2009). In Philadelphia, only 20% of the students held back in ninth grade went on to graduate within six years. Every additional course failed in ninth grade increased a student's chance of dropping out of school by one-third. For the 2003-2004 school year, 10th grade enrollment nationwide was no more than 95% of ninth grade enrollment, and one quarter of those school districts were no more than 90%.

Today's economy is technology-based and requires higher skilled employees (Mayer, 2002). Students who fail to graduate from high school are ill-equipped to find mid-level income positions within a competitive economy. High school dropouts who are not educationally prepared for a medium income position can get stuck in lower-income careers or face unemployment. According to the Bureau for Labor Statistics, the median yearly income of a high school dropout is \$10,000 less than the income of a high school graduate. In 2004, the U.S.

Department of Labor reported that those who dropped out of high school were 72% more likely to be unemployed than individuals who had earned a high school diploma. Additionally, in March 2012 the national unemployment rate for those who dropped out of high school was 14.1% compared to 9.4 % for high school graduates, and 6.8% for college graduates, demonstrating that achieving higher levels of education correlates with higher levels of employment. Finally, those who dropped out are at greater risk for delinquent behaviors (Harlow, 2003). Approximately 68% of state prison inmates, 50% of federal inmates, and 60% of jail inmates did not earn their high school diploma

Students may struggle for a variety of reasons: changes in life development, transitioning to a new building, under-preparation for high school, and school organization (Neild, Balfanz & Herzog, 2007). Students who successfully transition into high school have a higher chance of finishing school within four years; students who fall off-track in their first year of high school, however, have a much higher chance of eventually dropping out (Black, 2004). The most significant factor that impacts loss of achievement during the ninth grade year is inadequate preparation for the skills necessary to succeed in high school (Neild, 2009).

### **Academic Challenges**

The greatest concerns that students report during their transition to high school are academic in nature. Specific academic challenges include being academically underprepared, higher expectations, and perceived teacher expectations of student outcomes.

**Academically underprepared.** Many students enter high school with academic knowledge below what is necessary to be successful in challenging high school courses which already places them at a disadvantage that they need to overcome (Emmett & McGee, 2012).

Freshman students wished they had received more help in eighth grade from their teachers and support from their family and friends. Many students face the obstacle of having poor study skills and not knowing who to reach out to as a resource (Mizelle, 2005).

**Higher expectations.** Cushman (2006) interviewed new ninth grade students in Indianapolis, Indiana and found that the students believed that high school was a new, demanding challenge in their lives. When imagining what high school would be like before entering, incoming students worried that the experience would be overwhelming and complex, the workload would be greater, and academics would be increasingly difficult (Letrello & Miles, 2003; Mizelle, 2005). In self-report studies, female students rated themselves higher than male students in the areas of test anxiety, cognitive strategy, study skills, organization, and overall concern with the importance of school (Fulk, 2003).

Students entering high school need to adapt to higher expectations from teachers and struggle with learning how to manage their time between schoolwork and a social life (Letrello & Miles, 2003). One major change for new high school students is the credit accrual system that begins in ninth grade (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). High school credits increase accountability for students, which is different from middle school (Emmett & McGee, 2012). Furthermore, freshmen are responsible to make more decisions about their courses that can impact their future (Mizelle, 2005). Students reported that they needed more information about what classes they would need to take in high school, graduation requirements, and resources that can help them succeed in high school (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005).

**Lack of teacher support.** Teachers' perspectives of their students' struggles provide a well-rounded picture of what causes freshmen to struggle. Fulk (2003) found that surveyed high

school teachers were primarily worried about students' motivation, ability to do homework, and time management skills. In addition, Zeedyk et al. (2003) found that teachers may underestimate students' abilities to succeed in high school. In high school, teachers have less time to spend one-on-one with students and they tend to be less flexible than middle school teachers. High school teachers are less likely to allowing students to miss homework, which alters students' perceptions of their teachers (Cushman 2006). Ninth graders reported that they disconnect from the educational process when they believe that their teachers do not care about them as individuals (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

In regards to ethnicity, Hispanic and African-American perceptions of their teachers had a more significant impact on their chance of graduating high school than any other racial groups (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). Teachers may not be adequately preparing students to make the high school transition. Fifty five percent of high school teachers indicated that they never meet with teachers from feeder middle schools, 51% reported that they believe students are not prepared to learn the subjects they teach coming into high school, and only 37% of middle school teachers felt that the primary goal of the school was to help students prepare for rigorous high school courses (Cooney & Bottoms 2002).

### **Behavioral Challenges**

Students' classroom behavior is the greatest predictor of eventual dropout (Nield, Balfanz & Herzog, 2007). Ninth grade students have the highest rate of behavioral incidents and are the most at-risk of dropping out of high school (Chmelynski, 2004). In addition, in public schools with significant African-American and Hispanic student populations, disciplinary consequences

had the greatest detrimental impact on the transition to high school (Heck & Mahoe, 2006).

Other social concerns include identity development and bullying stressors.

**Identity development.** Developmentally, ninth graders are struggling with their own sense of identity, self-esteem, and wanting to feel accepted socially at the same time that they are thrown into an entirely different setting with new challenges. From 8th to 9th grade, students rated themselves lower in their perceptions of themselves in the areas of appearance and self-worth (Reents, 2002). The only area that increased from 8th to 9th grade was "close friendships". Males scored lowest in physical appearance and females scored lowest in global self-worth in the spring of their freshman year. Students in ninth grade are developmentally struggling with their own identity development, the added stressor of a new school can compound with the developmental stress of this life stage.

**Bullying stressors.** Prior to entering high school, middle school students also experience stress worrying about whether upperclassmen might bully them (Cushman, 2006; Mizelle, 2005). When nearly 500 students in the U.K. were surveyed about their high school worries, the primary concern was bullying, followed by social relationships, indicating how important social issues are to adolescents (Zeedyk, 2003). At a time when adolescents are developing their own identities, and trying to fit into social groups, the threat of bullying can create feelings of fear and isolation, disengaging students from the educational process.

### **Procedural Challenges**

Many students experience stress and worry anticipating the high school experience and its complex, impersonal, competitive environment (Haviland, 2005). Eighty percent of ninth grade students in public school systems moved to a new building for high school (Neild, 2009).

Middle school students tended to worry that they would get lost in the bigger building and would struggle to adapt to the change (Mizelle, 2005; Zeedyk, 2003). Students reported that one of the most challenging aspects of entering high school was becoming familiar with the new schedule (Letrello & Miles, 2005).

### **Benefits Of High School Transition**

The transition to high school is not only a time of stress and concern but it can also be marked by the excitement of new possibilities. Ninth grade can represent a transition into older adolescence as parents often take a step back once students enter high school (Neild, 2009). Incoming ninth graders anticipated more freedom in high school and having more choices in their course selection (Smith et al., 2008). Students also viewed high school as offering new opportunities (Letrello & Miles, 2003; Mizelle, 2005; Smith et al., 2008; Weiss & Bearman, 2007) and the potential for a fresh start (Cushman, 2006).

**Increased freedom.** When interviewed upon leaving middle school, students looked forward to the new freedom that they might experience as more mature high schoolers (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Mizelle, 2005; & Neild, 2009). Akos and Galassi (2004) asked eighth graders what they were looking forward to the most in high school, and students reported that they pictured high school to be a time when they would have more freedom and more choices in their course selection.

**Fresh start.** Although students tend to worry about what high school will bring, many find that their concerns are challenged by the reality of the new experience (Cushman, 2006). After the first few weeks of high school, new freshmen describe the transition as an opportunity for a fresh start and the chance to develop one's identity. The opportunity to start fresh can be

very appealing to students with prior challenges in middle school or a troubled past. Students who experienced feelings of isolation in middle school are likely to make new friends if they enter into a different school.

**More opportunities.** Both students and parents expressed excitement about the possibilities available in high school (Smith et al, 2008). A new experience with greater opportunities allows students to define themselves as individuals as they enter a setting with greater social diversity (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). High school is a time when students are excited about making friends, joining school activities, and preparing for life after high school (Mizelle, 2005). Students also reported that the easiest part of entering high school was making new friends, joining extracurricular activities, and experiencing a new sense of freedom (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Sixty three percent of Zeedyk's (2003) ninth grade sample reported that high school turned out to be better than they had anticipated.

There are many positive benefits to students entering a new high school (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). Ninth grade can represent a transition into older adolescence as parents give their children more freedom and students socialize more with their peers. Some students transition into high school with little challenge; they see high school as an improvement and start to form a new identity with new friends and teachers (Neild, 2009).

### **The Need for Intervention Programming**

Intervention programs can help at-risk students overcome struggles and stay in school. Multiple interventions that vary in focus and duration may be necessary to help students address all three areas of concern effectively (Akos & Galassi, 2004). School counselors can design transition programs that address the unique needs of freshman students (Black, 2004). Students



found it to be helpful when they had teachers who explained things well, had an interest in the subject matter, went to class daily, and had friends in the class (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005).

Freshmen reported that participating in extracurricular activities also helped students feel comfortable in their new school setting. Ninth grade students reported that they would tell incoming freshmen to become involved in school activities, develop strong study skills, complete all homework assignments, and take advantage of opportunities to make new friends. Students gave Cushman (2006) four recommendations for how middle school staff could prepare eighth graders for the transition to high school. The students suggested (1) providing an opportunity for middle schoolers to talk to high schoolers in order for them to hear a helpful perspective and answer questions, (2) teachers should give students more responsibilities in middle school to develop the skills they will need in high school, (3) school staff should help connect students with supportive adult resources to help them succeed, and (4) schools should work together to offer summer opportunities for orientation, tours, and meeting classmates to ease first day of high school confusion.

Solutions to help ninth graders were identified as school visits, teaming with middle schools, faculty professional coaching, student mentoring programs, smaller classrooms, summer orientation, planners to organize assignments, and tutoring (Fulk, 2003). Once ninth graders transition, strategies to support students include vertical teaming, catch-up schoolwork, academic advisement, and setting benchmarks to measure success (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Students who begin to experience success academically and make connections with peers and adults are likely to finish high school.

**Dropout prediction.** High school dropout can be predicted when school professionals know what warning signs to look out for in students. Warning signals allow school staff to identify students who need additional support early on to prevent future dropout (McIntosh & White, 2006; Mizelle, 2005; Nield, 2009; & Nield et al., 2007). Lower attendance rates, behavioral incidents, and failing course grades are all warnings that a student may eventually drop out of high school (Fulk, 2003; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Philadelphia's Middle Grades Programs and Talent Development High Schools were put in place in settings with lower graduation rates (Nield, 2009). Data from these initiatives have found that many students, who drop out of high school, sent warning signals long before the time they actually left school (Nield et al., 2007). Four warning signals in sixth grade students were (1) a final failing grade in Mathematics, (2) a final failing grade in English, (3) an attendance record of less than 80%, and (4) a final "unsatisfactory" behavior comment in any class. Sixth grade students, who had even one out of four warning signals, had a 75% chance of eventually dropping out of high school. Eighth grade students, in a cohort with either low attendance or a failing final grade in English or mathematics, were over 50% more likely to drop out of high school (Nield, 2009). The sooner a signal is sent, the greater the chance that the student will eventually drop out of school. Students who send their first warning signal during their freshman year of high school have a 75% chance of dropping out if they earn less than two credits during that academic year or had less than 70% attendance. Most of these students will stay in ninth grade for a few years before eventually getting discouraged and dropping out (Nield et al., 2007). If school districts pay attention to early warning signals, many future dropouts can be avoided with the necessary intervention programs in place.

**Drop out interventions.** Project Achieve is an intervention in which identified at-risk eighth grade students, and their parents, work with a transition coordinator who serves as a student advocate in the new building (McIntosh & White, 2006). Identified students attend the Project Achieve classroom during study hall to obtain help with classes and work on their progress towards goals they've set with the transition coordinator. Middle school building-wide initiatives such as an attendance reward program can help keep over 70% of the students on the graduation path. Secondary prevention such as signing a contract and having regular meetings with a school professional can reach the 20% of students who need more support. Finally, tertiary prevention may be able to reach the other 10% of students who require additional one-on-one support (McIntosh & White, 2006).

Most students in lower income urban communities have reading levels two to three years below grade level. Students who are not academically prepared for high school require programs designed to help them catch up to their peers. In addition to increasing math and reading requirements in middle school, schools can also identify 7th graders who might struggle in 9th grade courses, and intervene to: (a) improve their reading, English, and math skills; (b) enroll struggling students in accelerated courses with efficient teachers; and (c) work with families to develop a plan for high school courses and beyond (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; McIntosh & White, 2006). The graduation rate can rise when schools develop measures to track at-risk students and intervene early on (Nield, Balfanz & Herzog, 2007). Intervention programs should be flexible and targeted toward the specific needs of the students (Zeedyk, 2003).

### **Adult Support Systems**

At a time when students are struggling to become accustomed to a new, unfamiliar, and complex school structure, parents often become disengaged from their child's education (Chmelynski, 2004). Students in transition can benefit from the support of their parents and teachers during this challenging time. When parents take an interest and active role in helping their children succeed in high school, such as setting expectations for their education, ninth graders experience higher achievement (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

In addition to parents, teachers can be influential during the transition to high school if they provide information and assistance to address their students' concerns during this time. Although teachers and parents do not hold identical beliefs with students about the transition process, their perceptions are closely aligned, which places them in a good position to support students through their struggles entering high school.

In order to keep students engaged in school, teachers should plan interesting lessons that use a variety of teaching methods to reach all students and keep them excited about learning (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Teachers should also take the time to explain the expectations and requirements of their courses so that freshmen are well-informed and have a resource to communicate with when questions arise. School counselors are also an essential resource for students in transition as they are able to advocate for student needs during this time and can provide the necessary supports to ease the academic, social, and emotional changes that this time can bring (Cooper & Liou, 2007). Once students begin ninth grade, teachers and school counselors can continue to support their needs by placing 9th graders in one setting together, beginning high school with a freshman orientation, matching freshman with upperclassmen

mentors, and having extracurricular opportunities for freshman to grow a stronger school community (Cushman, 2006).

### **Academic Transition Interventions**

Proposed academic interventions to help with student transitions include teaching time management and effective study skills in eighth grade, revisiting these topics in ninth grade, maintaining communication between teachers, students, and parents about academic expectations, vertical teaming, and providing tutors (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Cooney & Bottoms (2002) recommend vertical teaming so teachers can collaborate on curriculum and expectations that prepare students for the high school experience. Letrello & Miles (2003) suggested that middle school transition teams should be formed to implement as many transitional programs as possible so students could visit the high school, learn about activities available to them, and understand the higher expectations and course requirements necessary. Team-teaching allows teachers to have conversations about specific at-risk students and develop a plan to serve that student's needs (McIntosh & White, 2006). Vertical teams should analyze the curriculum and ensure that high school courses are building upon the framework already put in place in high school (Mizelle, 2005). In order to help 9th graders succeed, high schools can also offer catch-up opportunities and extra help for students who are underprepared for the academic demands (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Nield, 2009). Researchers have found that students in high level courses are as likely to succeed in those courses as students in lower level courses (Cooney & Bottoms, 2002). Middle level students could be successful in higher-level courses if high schools gave them the opportunity to take these courses with the best teachers and the support necessary. Enrollment in demanding courses does not equate to more failures; rather, greater expectations lead to greater success. In order to improve

academic challenges, high schools should enroll students in college-prep courses, hold all students to the same demanding standards, and work to educate families about the importance of challenging courses in high school and post-secondary planning. When schools have high expectations of their students and teachers, and offer extra support when needed, they produce successful students. Although academic concerns are the greatest reported; students, however, report that the primary transition methods they use are social in nature (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

### **Social Transition Interventions**

Schools that emphasized a sense of belonging had students with greater academics, and less behavioral issues than in schools that did not (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). In order to address the challenges that ninth graders face, schools need more than one intervention. Freshmen need the support of teachers who care and take the time to communicate lessons to their students in a helpful and interesting way and the opportunity to feel welcome at school with a sense of community that allows for new friendships to form (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005).

Social concerns can be addressed by building school community with small group activities during orientation, team building opportunities and smaller learning settings to balance students' social needs with the academics (Black, 2004; Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Cushman 2006). In addition, block scheduling allows students to have more time with their teachers and the lessons can go into greater detail due to the extended class time. When teachers spend more time with students they are able to get to know them better and identify students that are struggling and require further support (Cushman, 2006).

An individual learning plan can be designed for students at-risk of failing ninth grade as a means of early intervention. In addition, a family night for new students, evening meetings with

parents, check-in meetings with incoming freshmen, and recognition for their birthdays or perfect attendance can create a sense of community that engages students and their families in the educational process.

School professionals also need to consider how race and culture play a role in the impact of enrollment decisions in order to increase their chances of success in high school. Heck & Mahoe (2006) stressed the importance of designing transitional programs that consider individual and structural factors. Extra support programs for high school transition increased the chance that ninth grade students would remain on track to graduate. Schools with a focus on continuous improvement that offered more challenging courses such as advanced placement were more likely to have students graduate from high school.

### **Procedural Transition Interventions**

Procedural intervention programs help ease the transition to high school by building a sense of community, increasing freshman students' knowledge of the building and staff, and allowing new students to hear practical, helpful advice from upperclassmen who have been in their shoes and know how to get through it (Haviland, 2005; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Transition programs to familiarize students with the new setting can include a tour for eighth graders, an orientation with a scavenger hunt, and a walk-through of a student's schedule to experience what the high school setting will be like. "For Freshman Only" is a one-day summer orientation for new incoming students in which: upperclassmen act as tour guides leading small groups around the school, students attend workshops on success strategies taught by upperclassmen, and they meet school administrators to build relationships early on with support staff (Haviland, 2005). Summer school can also provide new freshman with a chance to get a

head start and familiarize themselves with the high school campus. Akos and Galassi (2004) have found, however, that school transitions, and the challenges that accompany it, are temporary. Procedural concerns will most likely fade away faster than academic and social concerns once a student has become familiar with the new educational setting.

Incoming students express many procedural, short-term worries such as learning the building layout. Parents expressed the greatest concerns about student security and getting along with peers. In order to help relieve parents' worries, school professionals can provide parents with data on school security and behavioral incidents to keep them informed (Smith et al., 2008). Students need practical information about what high school will be like and this can be achieved by offering an orientation, setting up a shadowing opportunity, offering school tours, and providing classes regarding study skills (Chmelynski, 2004).

### **School Structure Reforms**

Whole school reforms are advantageous, but require significant planning and resources making them difficult to adopt (Chmelynski, 2004). Ninth grade could be redesigned with team teaching, as a "school within a school" and modified curriculum to allow students to catch up to their peers and prepare for the rigorous courses that come in high school.

**Ninth grade academies.** Students need to be prepared for the expectations of high school and need the academic basis to be successful. School reforms and curriculum reforms can support students in their time of transition (Neild et al., 2007). Ninth grade academies are successful when a team of teachers can dedicate themselves to working specifically with this population and when a committee of parents, students, and teachers can provide input on the transition process to make recommendations for the academy.



If students can make it through ninth grade to tenth, they are far more likely to graduate from high school (Chmelynski, 2004). Freshman academies may be a solution to challenging obstacles. Freshman academies are more individualized, they allow students the opportunity to improve any academic deficiencies coming into high school, and they enable at-risk ninth graders more opportunities and resources to ease their transition into high school (Emmett & McGee, 2012). The freshman academy philosophy includes a devoted team of teachers who want to work with the specific needs of ninth grade students in order to make their transition to high school smoother and improve their chances of success (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2008). The freshman academy concept creates a community feeling that provides students with the direct attention necessary to succeed (Mizelle, 2005).

Freshman academies can create more manageable numbers of students for teachers to work with in a usually crowded high school setting (McIntosh & White, 2006). Students receive more direct attention from their teachers in these settings and a team-teaching approach allows teachers to have the opportunity to identify at-risk students and collaborate to implement strategies to solve their challenges. School configurations may also be modified in K-12, 7-12 or other configurations to decrease the number of total transitions students must endure in order to decrease the stress associated with transition (Smith, Feldwisch & Abell, 2006).

Philadelphia's Talent Development High Schools assign students to small ninth grade academies, where they double the course load in math and reading (Nield et al., 2007). The Philadelphia schools also offer small teams for all grades, career academies for 10th-12th graders, after school programs, and one-subject coaches as a resource for teachers. Attendance in these schools has increased 15%, the number of students to reach 11th grade has doubled, and suspensions and arrests are significantly less than other schools.

Some ninth grade academies are separate from the high school and research has found that these schools have increased rates of attendance, higher test scores, decreased behavioral incidents, and lower dropout rates (Haviland, 2005). Ninth grade academy students can take an elective class called "High School 101", which teaches students how to manage their time effectively, develop key study skills necessary for success in high school, decision-making skills, computer skills, and career exploration. Freshmen can benefit from a supportive, individualized setting where they can receive the unique education and help necessary to prepare them for the rest of high school without receiving pressure from older students.

Philadelphia's Talent Development initiative began using freshman academies in 2001, and from 2001-2004, suspensions have decreased 41% and arrests have decreased by 50% in these schools (Nield, 2009). Strategies to help improve the transition include: Project Transition, the Talent Development High School model, studying at-risk students' needs, on-track indication and summer programs. Many students were also able to receive the help necessary to come up to grade level in reading through the academy setting.

**Peer mentoring programs.** Peer mentoring can positively support students and provide the help necessary to succeed. Some programs involve high school students leading groups of middle schoolers and serving as peer mentors through their school transition (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Cross-age mentoring programs are strengths-based and provide mentees with support and academic help. Adolescents need role models who can be positive influences on their lives as they are at a time of identity development. Peer mentoring programs improve students' feeling connected to school, increase grades, improve social skills, and decrease behavioral incidents (Karcher, 2008). Upperclassmen mentors have also experienced the advantages to this program in regards to their improved self-esteem and connectedness to school. Mentors reported higher

numbers than their peers in the areas of self-esteem and feeling connected to school. Peer mentoring programs have a double positive advantage for mentors and the mentees they work with (Karcher, 2009).

### **Strategies for Success**

The transition to high school can be eased with the help of school counselors and other school staff by exposing eighth graders to higher academic standards, targeting the students who are academically at-risk, and helping those students to overcome challenges early on. Students will require continued support beyond ninth grade throughout the rest of high school and need adult resources to rely on for guidance (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2008).

**Involve parents.** Schools that address the needs of parents and students in their long-term transition initiatives help students feel more supported at school and at home during this challenging time (Smith et al., 2008). Parents are an important resource in a child's life; the relationship between schools and families is a strong tool that can help increase communication and set the stage for student success. Parents benefit from attending transition programs designed to engage them and to provide important information about their child's academic progress (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Smith et al., 2008). Surveying parents and students before the transition to high school is an effective method to learn what their needs, concerns, and expectations are (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Survey data can help school counselors design transitional programs that ease students' transition to high school. Transitional programs are more effective when they address students' and parents' concerns and inform them about the reality of what to expect in high school (Smith et al., 2008).

**Provide individual support.** Students are successful when they are able to recognize and showcase their strengths (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). High schools that provide educational opportunities for individual students to demonstrate their talents found that students were more engaged and felt more connected to their school community. Smaller learning communities or downsizing high schools create an environment for higher teacher to student ratios so students can receive the individual attention they require (Haviland, 2005). School counselors can work with identified at-risk students to further support their needs and create a plan to stay on track.

### **Summary**

The high school transition can pose many challenges to students academically, socially, and procedurally. Ninth grade is a critical year that often predicts whether students will be successful throughout the rest of high school, or if they will fall behind and eventually drop out. Researchers have identified the importance of evaluating transition programming efforts and implementing strategies to address all three areas of student concern. Counselors are positioned to support students especially during challenging times; they are able to collaborate with families, teachers, and the community to work towards the best interest of their students. School counselors can support students through this transition by tracking data related to students' attendance, behavior, and grades to target at-risk individuals and advocate for intervention efforts to ease the transition.

## Research Questions

After participating in transitional programming, is there an impact on:

4. 9<sup>th</sup> grade student attendance rates?
5. 9<sup>th</sup> grade student behavioral incidents?
6. 9<sup>th</sup> grade student grades?

## Methods

The transition from middle school to high school is a challenging time that can result in academic difficulties and social struggles that inhibit students' abilities to be successful (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Transitional programs can support the adjustment that students face and provide additional resources necessary for student success. Student achievement is often measured by grade point average, engagement in the educational process can be measured by attendance rates, and social adjustment can be measured by behavioral incidents. The current research evaluates the impact of transitional programming on grade point average, attendance rates, and number of behavioral incidents. The research is a between- groups quantitative experiment analyzing changes among the 2012 freshman cohort in comparison to the last three cohorts at one suburban high school. The data analyses are descriptive and inferential.

## Setting

The present research took place in a mid-sized suburban high school in the Northeastern United States of America. As of the 2010-2011 school year, there were 1,153 students enrolled in the school: 278 students enrolled in grade nine, 273 students enrolled in grade ten, 291 students enrolled in grade eleven, and 311 students enrolled in grade twelve (The New York State School Report Card, 2012). Of these students: 80% ( $N = 928$ ) are White, 9% ( $N = 108$ ) are Black or African-American, 8% ( $N = 92$ ) are Hispanic or Latino, 1% ( $N = 15$ ) are Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 1% ( $N = 6$ ) are American Indian or Alaska Native, and 1% ( $N = 5$ ) students are Multiracial. The average class size in this high school is 23 students. The suburban high school selected for this study implemented transitional programming for several years and the school counselors were intimately involved with implementation of the new programs. Upperclassmen served as peer mentors to incoming freshmen, an orientation is held at

the beginning of the year to acclimate new students to the building, and school staff participate in ninth grade team meetings to discuss social and academic issues that freshmen are facing. In addition, for the 2012 freshman cohort the counselors have increased classroom guidance and programming for issues concerning bullying & college and career planning, counselors are attending and participating in ninth grade team meetings, and are identifying students earlier for services to promote school attendance.

### **Participants**

Purposive sampling was used for the current study. All current students, who began their schooling at this high school in grade nine, were selected. Of these students, 275 were in the 2009-2010 cohort, 293 were in the 2010-2011 cohort, 271 were in the 2011-2012 cohort, and 300 were in the 2012-2013 cohort. Among these students, 24% ( $N = 279$ ) were eligible for free lunch, 11% ( $N = 128$ ) were eligible for reduced-price lunch, and four students were limited English proficient. All current students were selected for this study in order to compare their behavior, grades, and attendance during their respective 9<sup>th</sup> grade experience. As of the 2010-2011 school year, the annual attendance rate for this high school was 94% and student suspensions were 13% ( $N = 164$ ).

### **Intervention and Materials**

The researcher developed a data spreadsheet in order to track the grades, attendance, and behavioral incidents associated with each student in the four cohorts. The program that was used to collect student information was Infinite Campus, an academic database that maintains student data regarding personal information, enrollments, class schedules, attendance rates, academic grades, behavioral incidents, assessments, and students' transcripts. This database tool was an effective method to use due to its ability to maintain student records accurately over the six-year

period. In addition to the use of the Infinite Campus database, the researcher also reviewed each student's cumulative file, which was kept in a secure location within the high school. Each cumulative file contained documentation beginning in middle school through the student's high school experience. The file included transcripts, report cards, written documentation regarding disciplinary action, and was necessary to review in order to compare the students' eighth grade year to their ninth grade experience once they came to this high school.

### **Instrument & Data Collection Procedure**

The data was collected in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet that had twenty-four columns to track students' average GPA, number of behavioral incidents and days absent every ten weeks. The spreadsheet was organized by cohort and was transferred to SPSS for analysis. In order to conduct this research study, the researcher obtained permission from the High School Principal and the School Counselor Supervisor at the high school. In addition, the researcher submitted a research study proposal to The College at Brockport's Institutional Review Board and was approved to conduct this research. Upon receiving approval to begin the study, the researcher created a list of student participants in a data spreadsheet and tracked the four cohorts' grades, attendance rates, and behavioral incidents over the course of their eighth grade year and their ninth grade year.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed in the SPSS software to obtain descriptive statistics for all cohorts including mean and standard deviations for the three variables. In addition, independent t-tests were run to analyze whether the changes between past cohorts and the 2012 cohort were significant in any quarter.



## **Results**

Descriptive analyses were run to determine the four cohorts' eighth and ninth grade average GPA, attendance rates, and behavioral incidents. In addition, independent samples t-tests were run to identify any significant changes among the freshman cohorts.

**GPA Results across all grade levels**

Table 1

*Eighth Grade GPA Descriptive Results*

8th Grade	Cohort	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Quarter 1 GPA				
	2012	259	86.72	8.74
	2011	232	86.92	9.70
	2010	252	85.90	8.62
	2009	229	85.36	8.87
	Overall	972	86.23	8.99
Quarter 2 GPA				
	2012	262	85.26	9.24
	2011	230	85.58	10.61
	2010	253	84.40	9.58
	2009	231	84.79	9.83
	Overall	976	84.99	9.80
Quarter 3 GPA				
	2012	263	84.30	10.24
	2011	232	84.32	11.03
	2010	256	83.43	10.93
	2009	233	84.53	9.49
	Overall	984	84.13	10.44
Quarter 4 GPA				
	2012	264	83.88	12.67
	2011	234	83.72	13.01
	2010	256	82.21	11.04
	2009	234	83.92	11.44
	Overall	988	83.42	12.07

Table 2

*Comparing Eighth Grade GPA by Quarter Data Among Four Cohorts*

Cohorts Compared to 2012 Cohort	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> (two-tailed)	<i>SE</i>
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 1 GPA</b>				
2011 Cohort	0.24	489	0.81	0.83
2010 Cohort	1.07	509	0.29	0.77
2009 Cohort	1.71	486	0.09	0.80
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 2 GPA</b>				
2011 Cohort	0.36	490	0.72	0.90
2010 Cohort	1.04	513	0.30	0.83
2009 Cohort	0.55	491	0.59	0.86
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 3 GPA</b>				
2011 Cohort	0.03	493	0.98	0.96
2010 Cohort	0.94	517	0.35	0.93
2009 Cohort	0.26	494	0.79	0.89
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 4 GPA</b>				
2011 Cohort	0.139	496	0.89	1.15
2010 Cohort	1.60	518	0.11	1.04
2009 Cohort	0.03	496	0.97	1.09

*Note.* No significant results were found in the Eighth Grade GPA data among all cohorts.

Table 3

*Ninth Grade GPA Descriptive Results*

9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Cohort	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Quarter 1 GPA	2012	284	83.52	10.20
	2011	261	82.28	10.74
	2010	286	81.30	13.29
	2009	269	81.69	11.95
	Overall		1100	82.20
Quarter 2 GPA	2012	284	81.98	11.23
	2011	260	79.95	11.57
	2010	280	79.49	14.38
	2009	263	80.49	13.09
	Overall		1087	80.49
Quarter 3 GPA	2012	285	79.61	14.46
	2011	255	79.99	15.73
	2010	276	79.35	13.87
	2009	262	80.60	11.99
	Overall		1078	79.87
Quarter 4 GPA	2012	0	.	.
	2011	253	78.61	17.75
	2010	275	77.19	17.56
	2009	265	79.62	14.14
	Overall		793	78.46

Table 4

*Comparing Ninth Grade GPA by Quarter Data Among Four Cohorts*

Cohorts Compared to 2012 Cohort	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> (two-tailed)	<i>SE</i>
9 <sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 1 GPA				
2011 Cohort	1.37	543	0.17	0.90
2010 Cohort	2.24	568	0.03*	0.99
2009 Cohort	1.94	551	0.053	0.94
9 <sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 2 GPA				
2011 Cohort	2.08	542	0.04*	0.98
2010 Cohort	2.29	562	0.02*	1.09
2009 Cohort	1.43	545	0.15	1.04
9 <sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 3 GPA				
2011 Cohort	0.29	538	0.77	1.30
2010 Cohort	0.21	559	0.83	1.20
2009 Cohort	0.87	545	0.39	1.14

*Note.* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Significant changes were observed between the 2012 and 2011 cohorts in the second quarter only, and between the 2012 and 2010 cohorts in the first and second quarters all favoring the 2012 cohort. Thus, the 2012 cohort had statistically significant higher first and second quarter GPAs than the 2010 and 2011 cohorts.

**Attendance Results across all grade levels**

Table 5

*Eighth Grade Absences Descriptive Results*

8th Grade	Cohort	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Quarter 1 Absence Rates				
	2012	267	1.25	1.97
	2011	244	1.49	2.31
	2010	255	2.26	2.85
	2009	230	1.18	1.72
	Overall	996	1.55	2.30
Quarter 2 Absence Rates				
	2012	270	1.75	2.29
	2011	244	2.45	3.33
	2010	256	2.79	3.52
	2009	231	2.14	2.69
	Overall	1001	2.28	3.01
Quarter 3 Absence Rates				
	2012	276	1.91	2.41
	2011	245	2.79	4.76
	2010	259	2.38	3.01
	2009	234	2.05	2.53
	Overall	1014	2.27	3.31
Quarter 4 Absence Rates				
	2012	276	1.90	3.40
	2011	245	2.48	4.13
	2010	255	2.23	2.97
	2009	231	3.15	4.53
	Overall	1007	2.41	3.80

Table 6

*Comparing Eighth Grade Attendance Rates by Quarter Data Among Four Cohorts*

Cohorts Compared to 2012 Cohort	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> (two-tailed)	<i>SE</i>
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 1 Absences				
2011 Cohort	1.27	509	0.21	0.19
2010 Cohort	4.73	520	0.00**	0.21
2009 Cohort	0.42	495	0.68	0.17
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 2 Absences				
2011 Cohort	2.80	512	0.01*	0.25
2010 Cohort	4.04	524	0.00**	0.26
2009 Cohort	1.75	499	0.08	0.22
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 3 Absences				
2011 Cohort	2.71	519	0.01**	0.33
2010 Cohort	2.00	533	0.05*	0.24
2009 Cohort	0.64	508	0.52	0.22
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 4 Absences				
2011 Cohort	1.76	519	0.08	0.33
2010 Cohort	1.19	529	0.24	0.28
2009 Cohort	3.55	505	0.00**	0.35

*Note.* \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

Statistically significant changes were observed in the absence rates of the 2012 and 2011 cohorts during the eighth grade year, second and third quarters. The 2012 and 2010 cohorts had significant changes in the first, second and third quarters. Finally, the 2012 and 2009 cohorts only had significant changes in the fourth quarter. The 2012 cohort had the lowest average absences in all statistically significant cases.

Table 7

*Ninth Grade Descriptive Attendance Results*

9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Cohort	N	M	SD
Quarter 1 Absences	2012	285	1.73	3.71
	2011	261	2.49	5.46
	2010	285	1.64	2.50
	2009	272	1.83	2.89
	Overall	1103	1.91	3.79
Quarter 2 Absences	2012	285	2.36	3.79
	2011	261	3.96	7.14
	2010	285	2.94	4.42
	2009	272	3.34	4.59
	Overall	1103	3.13	5.13
Quarter 3 Absences	2012	285	2.24	3.24
	2011	262	3.25	6.07
	2010	285	2.85	3.92
	2009	272	3.01	4.00
	Overall	1104	2.82	4.41
Quarter 4 Absences	2012	285	0.4	0.96
	2011	262	3.09	6.15
	2010	285	2.88	4.52
	2009	272	2.65	3.73
	Overall	1104	2.23	4.36



Table 8

*Comparing Ninth Grade Attendance by Quarter Data Among Four Cohorts*

Cohorts Compared to 2012 Cohort	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> (two-tailed)	<i>SE</i>
<b>9<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 1 Absences</b>				
2011 Cohort	1.92	544	0.06	0.40
2010 Cohort	0.34	568	0.73	0.27
2009 Cohort	0.35	555	0.72	0.28
<b>9<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 2 Absences</b>				
2011 Cohort	3.31	544	0.00**	0.48
2010 Cohort	1.68	568	0.09	0.35
2009 Cohort	2.76	555	0.00**	0.36
<b>9<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 3 Absences</b>				
2011 Cohort	2.46	545	0.01*	0.41
2010 Cohort	2.03	568	0.04*	0.30
2009 Cohort	2.50	555	0.01*	0.31

*Note.* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

The 2012 and 2011 cohorts had significant changes in attendance rates during the ninth grade second and third quarters. The 2012 and 2010 cohorts only showed significant changes during the third quarter. Finally, the 2012 and 2009 cohorts had significant changes in the second and third quarters. The 2012 cohort had the highest rate of attendance in all of these cases.

**Behavior Results across all grade levels**

Table 9

*Eighth Grade Behavioral Incidents Descriptive Results*


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8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	<i>Cohort</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
8th Grade Quarter 1 Behavioral Incidents	2012	265	0.35	1.07
	2011	239	0.29	1.03
	2010	253	0.38	1.22
	2009	233	0.25	0.92
	Overall	990	0.32	1.07
8th Grade Quarter 2 Behavioral Incidents	2012	265	0.53	1.88
	2011	240	0.33	0.94
	2010	254	0.41	1.03
	2009	233	0.26	0.83
	Overall	992	0.39	1.27
8th Grade Quarter 3 Behavioral Incidents	2012	266	0.75	2.65
	2011	241	0.33	0.93
	2010	255	0.56	1.35
	2009	234	0.16	0.45
	Overall	996	0.46	1.62
8th Grade Quarter 4 Behavioral Incidents	2012	266	0.72	2.26
	2011	241	0.58	1.55
	2010	256	0.75	1.84
	2009	234	0.43	1.04
	Overall	997	0.63	1.75

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Table 10

*Comparing Eighth Grade Behavioral Incidents by Quarter Data Among Four Cohorts*

Cohorts Compared to 2012 Cohort	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> (two-tailed)	<i>SE</i>
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 1 Behavioral Incidents</b>				
2011 Cohort	0.64	502	0.52	0.09
2010 Cohort	0.90	517	0.37	0.13
2009 Cohort	2.02	496	0.04*	0.13
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 2 Behavioral Incidents</b>				
2011 Cohort	1.49	503	0.14	0.13
2010 Cohort	1.04	513	0.30	0.83
2009 Cohort	0.55	491	0.59	0.86
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 3 Behavioral Incidents</b>				
2011 Cohort	2.34	505	0.02*	0.18
2010 Cohort	1.03	519	0.31	0.19
2009 Cohort	3.37	498	0.00**	0.18
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 4 Behavioral Incidents</b>				
2011 Cohort	0.81	505	0.42	0.17
2010 Cohort	0.17	520	0.87	0.18
2009 Cohort	1.81	498	0.07	0.16

*Note.* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Statistically significant changes in behavioral incidents can be observed among the 2012 and 2011 cohorts during the third quarter of the eighth grade year; and among the 2012 and 2009 cohorts during the second and third quarters. The 2012 cohort had the highest rate of eighth grade behavioral incidents in all of these cases.

Table 11

*Ninth Grade Behavioral Incidents Descriptive Results*

9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Cohort	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Quarter 1 Behavioral Incidents	2012	282	0.22	0.73
	2011	258	0.28	1.01
	2010	290	0.21	0.89
	2009	272	0.32	0.93
	Overall	1102	0.25	0.89
Quarter 2 Behavioral Incidents	2012	283	0.28	1.03
	2011	264	0.36	1.20
	2010	290	0.38	1.07
	2009	273	0.33	0.92
	Overall	1110	0.34	1.06
Quarter 3 Behavioral Incidents	2012	283	0.45	1.29
	2011	264	0.33	0.98
	2010	290	0.28	0.93
	2009	272	0.61	1.66
	Overall	1109	0.42	1.25
Quarter 4 Behavioral Incidents	2012	0	.	.
	2011	265	0.18	0.67
	2010	290	0.3	0.96
	2009	272	0.56	1.60
	Overall	827	0.35	1.15

Table 12

*Comparing Ninth Grade Behavioral Incidents by Quarter Data Among Four Cohorts*

Cohorts Compared to 2012 Cohort	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> (two-tailed)	<i>SE</i>
<b>9<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 1 Behavioral Incidents</b>				
2011 Cohort	0.80	538	0.43	0.08
2010 Cohort	0.15	570	0.88	0.07
2009 Cohort	1.41	552	0.16	0.07
<b>9<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 2 Behavioral Incidents</b>				
2011 Cohort	0.84	545	0.40	0.10
2010 Cohort	1.14	571	0.25	0.09
2009 Cohort	0.60	554	0.55	0.08
<b>9<sup>th</sup> Grade Quarter 3 Behavioral Incidents</b>				
2011 Cohort	1.21	545	0.23	0.10
2010 Cohort	1.81	571	0.07	0.09
2009 Cohort	1.27	553	0.20	0.13

No statistically significant results were observed among any of the four cohorts regarding behavioral incidents during the ninth grade year.

### **Discussion**

Three major areas of concern for student transition into high school have been reported as: academic, social, and procedural (Akos & Galassi, 2004). In order to identify how students are impacted by their transition to high school, school counselors can analyze student data to track significant changes and areas of need. The current study was designed to monitor academic and behavioral changes during students' transition from middle school to high school. The purpose of this research was to identify the effectiveness of current transitional programming and identify areas of need for additional transitional support.

School transitions can create additional challenges for students in the academic, personal/social, and career domains (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). According to ASCA (2005), the role of the school counselor is to support students in all three domains, to identify challenges, and to implement programming that increases success for all students. The research findings from the current study are consistent with the literature in that student grades decline from eighth to ninth grade in part due to an increase in academic rigor and expectations. Many students entering high school are academically underprepared for the increased expectations and academic rigor, beginning at a disadvantage (Emmett & McGee, 2012). All four cohorts in the current study were also found to experience a decline in their grade point average from eighth grade to ninth grade, but the decline for the 2012 cohort was less than the other cohorts.

Transitional programs have been shown to support at-risk students academically and socially. In addition, a variety of interventions prior to the freshman year and after the transition are necessary to effectively support students at this challenging time (Akos & Galassi, 2004). All four cohorts experienced an orientation to high school, had freshmen mentors assigned to their advisement class, and their teachers met for team meetings on a regular basis to discuss freshmen

issues. In addition, unlike previous years the 2012 cohort's school counselors were required to participate in ninth grade team meetings and identify students with attendance issues earlier in order to provide additional support to keep them in school.

The 2012 cohort was found to have the highest ninth grade gpa for the first and second quarters after their transition into high school. The cohort's grades, however, dropped during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> quarter, which was typical of other cohorts demonstrating that additional transition programming may be necessary throughout the school year. In fact, there was no statistical difference between GPAs of the four cohorts during the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> quarters. Regarding attendance, consistent with research findings, the rate of absences increase between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade. In comparison to other cohorts, however, the 2012 cohort had a lower rate (statistically significant) of absences. Surprisingly, the 2012 cohort was on a trajectory for having more behavioral incidents than the 2009 and 2011 cohorts (based on 8<sup>th</sup> grade comparisons), but experienced typical (statistically insignificant differences) behavioral issues by the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade year. Thus, the programming offered to the 2012 cohort appeared to improve student outcomes in all three studied areas, as the 2012 cohort outperformed previous cohorts on school attendance and 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter GPAs, and changed their trajectory in the area of behavioral incidents between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

### **Limitations**

The present study was completed at a single suburban high school; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the greater population. The researcher used data from the student records of current students, who had started attending the high school in ninth grade. The data from students, who transferred out of the school, was not included. Finally, the participants were

organized by cohort; additional demographic information was not obtained to further analyze the research findings.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future research should consider analyzing the academic records of students in other settings such as urban school districts, rural school districts, and private high schools to compare results. Future studies should also consider trends among demographics such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status during the transition into high school in order to understand areas of need more specifically. In addition, various transition programs could be analyzed to understand their effectiveness on student success.

### **Implications for School Counselors**

School counselors are a valuable resource during times of transition due to their ability to collaborate, advocate, and implement programming to promote student success (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). The 2012 cohort in this study was found to have the lowest rates of days absent compared to all other cohorts in this high school. The finding was also significant because this cohort's school counselors actively worked to identify students earlier who needed referral services to improve their attendance. Although the freshman cohorts have all experienced similar interventions, such as: orientation, Freshman Peer Mentors, and teacher participation in Ninth Grade Team meetings, all four cohorts experienced a decline in grade point average from eighth to ninth grade. The 2012 cohort, however, experienced higher GPAs than previous cohorts for the first two quarters of 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The 2012 cohort also shifted from experiencing statistically significantly higher behavioral incidents in 8<sup>th</sup> grade than other cohorts to experiencing statistically insignificant differences in behavioral incidents in 9<sup>th</sup> grade.



The present study suggests that additional programming should be implemented to specifically address academic achievement following the transition into high school. The success of the initiative to improve school attendance for the 2012 cohort suggests that a transition program that extends the length of the freshmen year may lead to continued improvements in the areas of academic achievement, attendance, and behavior.

### **Conclusion**

The current research study is consistent with previous research in that student grades decline as students enter high school. The decline was lower for the 2012 cohort for the first two quarters, but then GPAs were comparable to previous cohorts' GPAs by the third quarter. The 2012 cohort did demonstrate a higher rate of behavioral incidents in 8<sup>th</sup> grade compared to previous cohorts, but by the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, their behavioral incidents were consistent with other cohorts' rates of incidents. Finally, the 2012 cohort did demonstrate statistically significant lower rates of student absences compared to previous cohorts, which was a new area targeted by the school counselors. The research findings suggest that further transitional support from school counselors is essential in order to prepare students for the academic, personal/social and career planning challenges that students face in high school.

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