Ninth Grade Transition: Practices Used by New York State High School Principals to Support Student Achievement During Ninth grade

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Abstract
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Ninth Grade Transition: Practices Used by New York State High School Principals to Support Student Achievement During Ninth grade

By

Dana Boshnack

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by
Dr. Guillermo Montes
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St. John Fisher College

May 2011
Dedication

This is dedicated to my husband Chris and our five children: Curteis,

Cameron, Marissa, Deasia and Ariana.
Biographical Sketch

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The faculty and staff at St. John Fisher have provided me with ongoing support during the past three years. I would like to thank Dr. Marie Cianca who served as both my drill sergeant and number one encourager. I especially want to thank my dissertation chair Dr. Guillermo Montes whose knowledge, enthusiasm and unwavering patience was the foundation for my success.

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A k cluster analysis was used to identify three cluster groups based on the practices being implemented by each respondent. The three clusters were categorized using the following labels: Extenders, Collaborators, or Low Implementers. A multinomial logic regression model was then used to determine the likelihood of demographic variables having any correlation with the groupings. This analysis revealed Low-Implementers as more likely to be schools with less than 25% of their students receiving free and reduced priced lunch (FARPL). Results of this study are relevant to educational leaders and policy makers seeking to identify practices most commonly used to support ninth grade transition and those practices principals would want to implement if afforded the necessary resources.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Current reports indicate that the United States has a dropout crisis of significant proportions. According to recent research, one-third of today’s students are leaving school prior to receiving a high school diploma (Barton, 2005). Additionally, 40-50% of schools in the largest U.S. cities are graduating less than half of their ninth grade class within four years (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). In some urban school systems, more than 50% of students leave high school before obtaining a diploma. The nation’s dropouts are concentrated in large urban schools with predominately low-income minority students (Balfanz, 2009). A significant number of these dropouts have not accumulated enough credits to be promoted beyond ninth grade. The literature indicates that it is critical to investigate the high school transition year when developing programs to decrease the dropout rate (Neild, R., Stoner-Eby, S, Furstenberg, F., 2008).

Graduation rates are considered the performance metric of U.S. high schools. However, one barrier is the inconsistency that exists between states when it comes to defining and reporting educational measures (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) provides the nation’s most commonly cited dropout statistics. The NCES uses primarily two data sources, the Current Population Survey (CPS) and the Common Core of Data (CCD) to provide four different statistics: even dropout rate, status dropout rate, status completion rate, and averaged freshman
graduation rate. Regardless of what metric is used, there is no doubt that the dropout problem is a major policy and human problem for the United States today.

The Importance of Ninth Grade

Ninth grade has been identified as the most critical point of intervention to prevent students from losing motivation and dropping out of school (Reents, 2002). In most cases, students transition to high school in ninth grade. The transition to high school has taken on greater importance as a recent study has shown that students decide whether to continue their high school experience within the first few weeks of their ninth grade year (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999); this leads researchers to investigate the high school transition year, particularly because of the direct correlation between ninth grade achievement and graduation rates. (Neild et al., 2008). Indeed, students who manage a successful transition to ninth grade have a high probability of graduating four years later. Those students who do not transition well, fall off track and do not earn the required credits, and face a greater risk of dropping out of high school. Analysis of student progression through high school suggests that approximately one-third of the nation’s recent high school dropouts never were promoted beyond ninth grade (Neild, 2009).

The transition to high school can be a critical turning point for adolescents’ social and academic lives. During the ninth grade year, students face academic, procedural, and social challenges (Ascher, 2006). Entering a diverse academic and social environment poses both challenges and opportunities. The institutional and social changes that students endure have a significant influence on their educational careers. There is consistent evidence that the inadequacy of the school environment causes, to some degree, a decline in student functioning and increases the risk for student maladjustment
and school disengagement (Gillock & Reyes, 1996; Barber & Olsen, 2004).

Transitioning students into a new environment requires that schools develop structures to support the academic and social needs of the incoming students.

The ninth grade transition process is complex, and research on this transition period has been limited. While the research is rich in the area of ninth grade significance for graduation, it has failed to identify which states are consistently using achievement data or benchmarks to follow the rates of ninth grade students who are on track for graduation. Furthermore, much of the research on high school transition has emerged from specialized populations (e.g., low income, minorities) (French, Seidmean, Allen, & Aber, 2000; Newmann et al., 2000; Seidman 1996). Thus, current research is limited in informing us about which transitional practices are being implemented and the impact research-based practices are having on ninth grade achievement.

*Ninth Grade Failure Rate*

More students are failing ninth grade than any other grade (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). There are short–term educational consequences for students who fall off track for graduation that include retaking courses. The long-term educational consequences are more severe, including student drop out. Case studies from urban districts have demonstrated that students who are not promoted to tenth grade are less likely to graduate than those who pass ninth grade (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).

The main reason for attrition between ninth and tenth grade is that some students had dropped out, while others were held back to repeat grade nine. On a national level, many students are held back in ninth grade, creating what is known as the “ninth grade
bulge” (NCES, 2005). Over the last 30 years, on a national level, the bulge of ninth grade students has more than tripled, from approximately 4% to 13% (Haney, W., Madaus, G., Abrams, L., Wheelock, A., Miao, J., & Gruia, I., 2004).

Transition Programs

There is vast literature on transition-type programs for students entering a new school that will be reviewed extensively in Chapter 2. This chapter includes a summary of the literature focusing on definitions and the interventions related to ninth grade transitions.

The literature illustrates the ambiguity in defining a transition program. Programs that support student transition are often defined as those that improve student attendance, achievement, and retention (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). The transition programs that provide the most effective student support and graduate students with their cohort offer several varied activities. These activities (1) provide information about the new school, (2) involve parents in the new school, (3) give social support to students, and (4) bring middle and high school staff together to learn about curriculum and other requirements (MacIver, 1990).

Although a clear framework defining a comprehensive transition program has not been established, the research includes three areas to consider when establishing a program: academic, social, and structural/procedural components. Therefore, different types of intervention of different durations may be required for students to cope successfully with the three aspects of the transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

Universal transition programs. Some transition programs are developed to meet the needs of all students—universal programs. To address the needs of all students,
research suggests that effective transition programs have five or more diversified activities (MacIver, 1990). This is done at the universal level, through a transition process that includes visits to the new school. The most common activities include meetings with administrators and discussions of program studies with counselors from both schools. In addition, transition activities span the spring and summer before entry into the new school and continue into the fall (Irvin, 1992).

Studies have found that schools with an increased number of at-risk students have fewer activities focused on transitioning (MacIver, 1990). However, when an effort to improve the transition process has been made, such as developing a “school within a school,” the effectiveness was clear and increased promotion rates followed (Letgers & Kerr, 2001). For at-risk students, support should be in place during the entire ninth grade year (Diemert, 1992).

*Targeted transition programs.* Students are placed *at risk* when they experience a significant mismatch between their needs and the ability of the school to accommodate those needs in a manner that supports their maximum social, emotional, and intellectual growth and development (Hixson, 1993). Students with a history of problem behavior have difficulty successfully negotiating transitions because they generally do not have the social skills to adjust to the new environment, and, as a result, they continue to get in trouble (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

Research suggests that students who have the greatest difficulty are those who are not academically prepared. Students with grade point averages (GPAs) in the lowest quartile were most at risk for continued low achievement and eventually dropped out. Low-SES minority students, especially boys, were at risk for dropping out. Cauley and
Jovanovich (2006) speculate that part of the problem for low-socio economic status (SES) minority students is the lack of parental support.

Targeted Transition Programs are designed to address the needs of at risk students by providing alternative approaches and support for a successful transition. Many targeted programs are short-term, such as summer programs that focus on building academic skills. Other programs focus on career development. Sample targeted programs are included in Table 2.

**Table 1.1**

*Transition Programs for At Risk Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
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<tr>
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<td>CRESPAR / Johns Hopkins University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Twilight Academy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(EIP) Early Identification Program</td>
<td>George Mason University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summerbridge Program</td>
<td>San Francisco University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Upward Bound</td>
<td>Quantum Opportunity Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REACH (Readiness Education for Achieving Career Hts)</td>
<td>Jacksonville State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twilight Academy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Career Academies</td>
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**Accountability Indicators**

Research suggests that both school organization and instructional improvement are necessary to keep ninth graders on track to graduation (Neild, 2009). School districts
and state departments of education are addressing this problem by focusing on ninth grade students and creating accountability indicators for the ninth graders who are on track. States are supporting each district’s capacity to maintain and analyze the data that monitors student progress and identifies students who are falling off track.

School districts set their own promotion standards for students moving from ninth to tenth grade. Furthermore, districts vary in how they report local data. In order to identify the number of students not promoted to the next grade, a comparison is made using the number of students enrolled in ninth grade, with the number in eighth grade during the previous year, and tenth grade during the subsequent year. (Neild, 2009). Many schools have data systems in place that collect information that can be used as early warning systems for identifying students who are at risk for failure.

**Gaps in Our Current Knowledge**

Chapter 2 will present a review of what is known about transition practices. However, it is evident that there has been almost no research on statewide practices to facilitate a successful ninth grade transition. An exception is a statewide Maryland study where Kerr (2001) used survey data to investigate the extent to which ninth grade reform practices were implemented across the state. The study compared practices with school demographic characteristics and examined the impact of these practices on student success. Evaluation was based on ninth grade attendance, student achievement, as well as promotion and dropout outcomes. Survey results revealed that Maryland high schools were using a diverse set of transition practices with their ninth grade students. Twenty-five percent of Maryland high schools indicated they had a school-within-a-school, an academy, or another small learning community for ninth graders. One-third of schools
provided students in need of extra help with a double dose of a core academic class. More than half of Maryland high schools reported that ninth graders met in extended periods, and one third of the high schools had a homeroom or advisory group.

A similar gap exists in what is known about the role of the high school principal and successful ninth grade transitions. Importantly, when principals implement practices that are not evidence-based, they can have a negative impact on student achievement (Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). Organizations including the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the National Middle School Association (NMSA) have identified the need for educators to develop and implement age-appropriate programs to assist students in a seamless high school transition. Currently, it is unknown if these practices are widely implemented by high school principals.

Along with developing structures for academic and social support, district leaders are beginning to use data to track ninth grade progress. Chicago Public Schools, for example, have incorporated an on-track indicator for ninth graders into the school’s accountability system. The scorecards reporting average daily attendance and student achievement, including Advanced Placement courses, are shared publicly. Preliminary research reports that these on-track indicators are contributing to a 10% increase in the share of students who were on track to graduate at the end of ninth grade (Chicago: consortium on Chicago school research, 2005).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify research-based practices that are being implemented by principals across New York State for students transitioning into ninth grade. This study addresses many of the identified gaps by conducting a statewide
survey of principals on the implementation of transition practices that support student success in ninth grade. This was the first study in New York State and will follow the methodology and general approach of the successful Maryland study (Kerr, 2001), which is now almost a decade old. The study was focused around two critical questions.

Research Questions

1. What are the current program components being implemented by New York State high school principals to support ninth grade transition?

2. Which program components would principals most likely implement to support ninth grade transition if afforded the necessary resources?

Significance of the Study

Most of the research in the area of transition has been focused on large urban high schools with identified at-risk program components in place. This study is significant in that it identifies the program components used to support ninth grade transition in a variety of types of high schools across New York State. The study will benefit educators, school leaders, and researchers by providing information on what is currently in place to support ninth grade students in schools of various sizes and demographics. Moreover, the study will provide policy-makers with information about what programs high schools principals would implement if afforded the necessary resources.

This study focused on New York State because of the diversity of districts, school sizes, and structures. It is likely that the results will inform other educational systems about the challenges and opportunities of facilitating ninth grade transition for similar districts nationwide.
Summary

Statewide studies to analyze the impact of variables and structural characteristics on student outcomes, such as ninth grade achievement and high school dropout rates, are necessary to inform policy-makers about issues such as curriculum articulation, dropout prevention, school configuration, and cross-building communication (Smith et al, 2008).

There is much to discover about how to help support student success in ninth grade and to keep them on track for graduation. There are reform models and program practices that have shown promise. It is the responsibility of educational leaders to provide curricula, organizational structures, and effective teachers to support all ninth grade students.

Although states and districts are increasing efforts to support ninth grade achievement, their efforts lack evidence about which reforms worked or do not work, and for whom and under what circumstances (Rouse & Kemple, 2009). States that include benchmarks or on-time indicators for ninth graders have shown an increase in student achievement (Neild, 2009). This study has contributed to the literature by providing information on the structures and practices that are in place to support ninth grade transition.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Educational leaders face increasing challenges as they prepare students for the rapid changes of the 21st century. Despite increasing efforts, one third of today’s high school students leave before earning a diploma (Barton, 2005). Ninth grade has been identified as the most critical point of intervention in order to prevent students from dropping out of school (Akos, 2004; Ascher, 2006; Smith, 1997). The research literature is examined related to ninth grade transition, student perceptions, achievement, and the role of school leaders. This chapter provides a current review of the literature by examining student perceptions, on-track predictors, and the practices and programs around ninth grade transition.

Critical Point of Intervention

Although studies have generated guidelines that support ninth grade transition, research has suggested that data can also be used to locate the students who are most likely to be affected by the transition and understand the root cause of their struggles. An at-risk or on-track indicator determined by academic progress can be used to inform and evaluate transition programs to the greatest benefit. These indicators, which are currently used to determine high school and college readiness in cities such as Chicago and Philadelphia, use data on credit accumulation, attendance, and course failures to identify students who are at risk of dropping out of school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Neild & Balfanz, 2006).
According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, only 60% of students who have multiple risk factors in the eighth grade graduate from high school on time. Students who do not have multiple risk factors have a 90% rate for graduating on time (1996). There is a link to ninth grade transition and graduation rates, and consequently, completing high school is one of the most important predictors of economic success, health, and political participation.

*Pivotal Year for Graduation*

The ninth grade retention rate is a problem in the United States. Progress in ninth grade is essential for on-time graduation, and those who are not successful are more likely to drop out of school. Addressing student needs in ninth grade cannot be done solely at the high school level. To address student achievement, retention, graduation, and readiness for college and careers, states are examining what is in place that supports a successful transition from middle grades to high school (The GWU, 2008).

On-track indicator research from several U.S. school districts provides a strong foundation for establishing warning signs that a ninth grade student may drop out by the end of ninth grade or even during the first semester of high school. Powerful indicators exist that can predict whether students will graduate from high school. These three indicators are (a) engagement, (b) course performance grades, and (c) the number of core credits earned towards the graduation requirements.

Students who do not earn the necessary credits in ninth grade are considered off-track for graduation and face an elevated risk of dropping out of high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005, Neild, 2009). Students are determined to be on-track based on the number of credits they have earned towards graduation. Research indicates
that students who are on-track at the end of their freshman year of high school are more
than three and one-half times more likely to graduate in four years than those students
who are off-track (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).

When students enter ninth grade as freshmen, they begin to earn credits toward
graduation by passing their classes. In New York State for example, students must earn
22 credits within four years to graduate from high school. However, U.S. school districts
set their own standards for promotion to the next grade, and these requirements vary from
one district to another. For example, some districts require students to earn four full-year
credits for promotion to ninth grade. This means they have completed the course
requirements for at least four core curriculum courses.

Ninth grade promotion rates are determined by comparing the number of students
enrolled in ninth grade, to the number in eighth grade during previous years, with those
who are promoted to tenth grade. It is difficult to accurately analyze ninth grade
promotion rates across districts or states, since many districts have different promotion
criteria and many do not collect, track, or report these data. As a result, comprehensive
national data on promotion criteria are not available for individual states or districts.

The nationally represented data are from the Current Population Survey (CPS). The
CPS is a household survey, so many parents responding to the survey may assume
that a student in the second year of high school is automatically a tenth grader even if the
student has failed required courses and may be classified by the district as a ninth grader.
This results in the underestimating of ninth graders who are not promoted, but offers data
about the discrepancies between race and ethnicity, gender, family, and socioeconomic
status (Fredrick & Hauser, 2008).
The Ninth Grade Bulge

Although the reporting of ninth grade promotion rates is inconsistent among U.S. school districts, the National Center for Educational Statistics reports a dip in tenth-grade students. This data includes the number of students not promoted and those students who dropped out of high school (NCES, 2005). This statistic has been referred to by many researchers as the ninth grade bulge. It is easy to estimate rates at which students were forced to repeat the ninth grade by calculating how many more students are enrolled in grade nine than in grade eight the previous year. On a national level, in the last 30 years, the bulge of ninth grade students has more than tripled, from approximately 4% to 13% (Haney et al., 2004). As represented in the ninth grade bulge, as well as in a study by Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg (2008), the key area to focus on to reduce high school dropout rates is on the transition to high school itself.

Drop Out Rates

An important aspect of this at-risk research and ninth grade transition is the implication for identifying the factors linked to the dropout rates. Recent reports have indicated that the U.S. has a dropout crisis of alarming proportions (Education Week, May 2007). In some large cities, more than 50% of students do not graduate from high school. Many of these students have not accrued enough credits to be promoted beyond ninth grade. Researchers concur that educators’ efforts to decrease the dropout rate would benefit from focusing on the critical high school transition year (Neild et al., 2008, Neild & Balfanz, 2006, Balfanz & Legters, 2004, and Kerr, 2003).
At-Risk Students

Much of the research on at-risk students indicates that a lack of school engagement is a major contributing factor of student drop-out. A study by Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, and Hall (2003) examined the effect of self-efficacy, goal orientation, and fear of failure on school engagement. Their research findings indicated that students who had higher confidence levels generally had higher grades in school and were more likely to be engaged in school activities and organizations. Students who displayed a fear of failure were found to be less engaged than their peers with school-related activities and events (Caraway et al., 2003). It is suggested in the research that students who get involved with school activities are less likely to drop out of school (Caraway et al., 2003, Suh & Suh, 2007).

The research by Suh and Suh (2007) determined the risk factors contributing to high school dropout and the extent of their impact on the likelihood of dropping out. Based on prior research, the study classified students into three at-risk categories: a low grade point average (GPA), low SES, and behavioral problems. This study found 16 predictors within these three categories that interact to increase the risk of dropping out. The predictors included: low eighth-grade grade point average, low SES, prior suspensions, students’ expectation to remain in school the following year, enrichment risk, absenteeism, two-parent household, physical environment risk, sex prior to age 15, household size, peers planning to go to college, metropolitan area resident, region, perception toward teachers, fights at school. The study also found that as a student’s risk increased, the likelihood that he or she would drop out of school also increased. Their research indicated that dropout prevention strategies were more successful with students
who had fewer risks, and that interventions were least successful with those students who
had all three risk factors: behavioral issues, low SES, and low GPA.

School Structures

Organizational structures that are in place on a district-wide level include school
feeder patterns and school configurations. The literature on school configuration informs
us that there is no single model to achieve all desired goals. Academic achievement,
student social development, and school dropout rates are all influenced by feeder patterns
and grade span configuration. Focusing on one of these must take into consideration how
the others will be affected. In order to make the best decision about which configuration
to use, therefore, it is imperative to know what goals are being sought and where they fit
in the district’s list of priorities.

Hertzog and Morgan (1997) pose that the greatest difference in the educational
continuum exists in the gap between middle and high school. The researchers explain
that the process of grade organization is such that preschool feels like kindergarten; fifth
grade feels like sixth grade; but eighth grade in middle school is nothing like ninth grade
in high school. Ninth graders face the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual
challenges of this stage of development, and it is reported that most feel overwhelmed
and stressed.

School Configuration

Education in the United States provides for kindergarten through grade 12 in a
variety of grade arrangements, from the K-12 school to separate schools for single
grades. Schools are organized in different ways, including K-3, K-4, K-5, K-6, K-8, K-9,
or K-12; others are organized as middle schools, junior high schools, and senior high
schools; and still others consist of students in just one grade, such as a ninth grade building.

The Middle School Movement occurred between the 1960s and 1970s, where reorganization occurred, hoping to provide a smoother transition for students. Schools implemented structural changes, including grade configurations of either 5-8 or 6-8, with the placement of ninth graders varying according to the design of the district. According to Alexander and George (1981), the decision to move ninth graders out of the middle grades was often made for more practical reasons rather than based on the developmental needs of students or theoretical goals of the middle school design. The best placement of ninth graders continues to be a topic of debate of educators (Epstein & MacIver, 1990).

Another structure that has been established is the ninth grade only model. Although some promote this model as an approach to addresses the specific concerns of this grade level, there is evidence that additional transitions result in achievement loss for students. The decision to isolate ninth graders is often based on budgetary reasons, yet some argue that separating students reduces the stress associated with entering a school with older students. Currently, there are only nine schools in New York State that have ninth grade only models and the research in this area is limited.

The research indicates that students transitioning from middle school are more likely to drop out than those students who attend a K-8 school (Alspaugh, 1998; Mizelle, 1999). A study conducted by Alspaugh focused on the achievement loss associated with school to school transitions from elementary school to middle school and to high school. Using three groups of 16 school districts in this *ex post facto* study, the study found a statistically significant achievement loss with the transition from elementary school to
middle school at the sixth grade level as compared to a K-8 program. Both K-8 and middle school students experienced achievement loss in the transition to ninth grade, however the middle school students experienced a greater achievement loss than the K-8 students did. The high school dropout rates were also higher for middle school students than for the K-8 students. Alspaugh concludes that students who are structured in relatively small cohort groups for long spans of time tend to have higher achievement levels than those who have additional transitions between buildings and peer groups. He found that some students regained what was lost the following year, but those who had fewer transitions needed fewer years to make up for the achievement loss caused by the transitions.

A similar study done by Paglin & Fager (1997) study found that each time students transitioned from schools, their feelings of anonymity increased. These researchers found that sixth-grade students in both elementary and K-12 schools outperformed sixth-grade students in middle schools and junior high schools. The significant factor associated with the decrease in performance was the number of transitions the students experienced. Paglin & Fager considered eight schools with seven different grade spans with student populations of 82 to 1,200. The study consisted of both urban and rural settings in five northwest states and the number of grades in the schools ranged from one to eleven.

*Feeder Patterns*

Another study, by Schiller (1999), focused on school structure by examining the patterns of movement, namely feeder patterns, from middle school to high school, and the transitional effects on academic achievement. Data for this study were provided by the
students themselves, their parents, school administrators, and data taken from the students’ transcripts. The sample taken in the base-year of the study included about 25,000 eighth graders from approximately 1,000 schools. During the two-year span between the base year and the follow-up data collection, the students dispersed among approximately 3,000 high schools. A sub sampling of 1,500 of these high schools produced a sample of about 17,500 students. The analysis for this study was based on a sub sample of about 12,000 students who had transcripts, were enrolled in school in 1990, and were not American Indians. The analysis focused on freshmen mathematic grades as a measure of student academic success during the first year in high school. Mathematics was selected because it is a core subject that is a strong indicator of student achievement and is of particular interest to policy makers. The results pointed to the fact that students who were successful academically in middle school, specifically grade eight, did better (i.e., higher grades) in high school when they attended the same high school that their eighth-grade classmates did. However, those students who were not as successful academically in grade eight seemed to do better in grade nine by attending a different high school. Schiller concludes that school structures and institutional processes affect students differently and may provide varying opportunities for mobility within the stratification systems of schools. The organizational change process includes institutional and social factors that can influence students’ educational careers either in a positive or negative way.

Organizational Practices

Structures within a school building include practices that organize students and the services they receive. Research on school organization and school restructuring has
identified practices that encourage experiences indicative of a communal organization. These practices are those established by the building leader, the school principal, and will be discussed in further detail. A close examination of organizational practices at the building level will reveal how principals promote a communal school organization and the positive outcomes associated with their use.

*Literature on Ninth Grade Transition*

The literature on ninth grade transition seems to have three areas of concentrated focus: student perceptions, risk factors for dropping out, and programs and practices targeted at ninth grade. First, the research has identified the range of perceptions of students: their concerns and the strategies schools have implemented to support the unique academic and social needs of these students. Second, much of the research discusses the significance of ninth grade and dropout prevention. Last, the literature is rich with identifying programs, practices, and high school reform models that have been developed to target all students and especially those who are most at risk for not graduating.

*Challenges Based on Student Perceptions*

Some researchers argue that students are excited about going to high school and look forward to more choice, more freedom, new opportunities, extracurricular activities and making new friends, however they are also fearful about increased work load, finding their way in a new building, increased homework, and being teased. Figure 2.1 identifies student fears prior to entering ninth grade and the stressors most identified by students during their first year of high school (Ascher, 2006; Copeland, 2006; Eanes, 2005; Akos et al., 2004; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Hertzog & Morgan, 1997; MacIver, 1990).
Figure 2.1. Student fears and challenges.

Transition stressors are those identified by students to have a negative impact on transition to high school, and include: (a) poor relationships with teachers, (b) academic difficulties, (c) adjustment to school environment, and (d) problems of social/peer relationships. Positive aspects of transitioning include: (a) meeting new peers, (b) increased autonomy, and (c) sports and activities.

The research also indicates that many students have misperceptions about what to expect in high school (Mizelle, 1995; Smith et al., 2008). In a study by Mizelle, students indicated that high school was different from what they had expected and in many ways the issues that they feared were not present. However, the same study revealed that students found high school work more demanding and required managing their time differently than in middle school.

In a similar study, students, staff, and parents were surveyed about their perceptions of the ninth grade transition (Smith et al., 2008). The three stakeholder groups were asked about the perceived differences and similarities between middle and
high school and about the transition process itself (2008). This study reveals the perspectives of students before and after their transition to high school. The study was conducted in a large public school district in the Midwest. The students in the study transitioned from two middle schools (grades six through eight) to a Freshmen Center (ninth grade only). One-hundred seventy-two students and 94 parents participated in the survey component of the transition to ninth grade study. One hundred nineteen of the 172 students completed the post-transition survey in the ninth grade.

Findings reveal student misperceptions about what high school will be like as they begin ninth grade with what they actually experience. In addition to preparing students for changes at the high school level, Mizelle found that parents were equally interested in knowing about what to expect at the high school level. Parents want accurate information to convey high school offerings and procedures. With an emphasis on middle and high school communication and collaboration, it is suggested that schools provide information to students and parents to provide an accurate understanding of the differences between middle school and high school (Ascher, 2006; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000 not in RL; Mizelle, 1995; MacIver, 1990).

As illustrated in Figure 2.2., there is a strong consensus that the concerns of adolescents entering ninth grade need to be met by establishing an effective multi-level program that addresses academic, procedural, and social challenges (Akos, 2004; Ascher, 2006; MacIver & Epstein, 2002; Hertzog and Morgan, 1997; Mizelle, 1999).
Some researchers consider the transitions to a new school, along with developmental changes associated with adolescence, as a part of the normative, stressful events that all youth endure in their progression to adulthood. The consensus from anecdotal, theoretical, and empirical studies of varying design is that the transition to high school requires the enactment of a variety of coping strategies to meet new social, academic, and environmental challenges. The following paragraphs address three identified areas of transition: social, academic and procedural.

Social Challenges

Transitioning ninth graders may experience disruptions in friendships as they enter a new building. These school-related changes may lead to significant changes in social support. Peers may also play a significant role in students’ attitudes, including their mindset towards school (Berndt, 1982, Kelly & Hansen, 1987). Adolescents often provide support for each other during challenging times and provide a buffer during the stress of transition. Peers may also serve as models for students in how to meet new social and academic challenges associate with ninth grade transition.
According to Newman, B., Lohman, Newman, P., Myers, M. & Smith, V. (2000), the negotiation of peer relationships is one of the central components to supporting a successful academic transition to high school. Newman et al. (2000) conducted a qualitative research study of 29 students, 12 who had completed eighth grade and 17 who had completed ninth grade at the beginning of the study. Each of the 29 students provided the focus for a multidimensional case analysis. The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that were associated with academic success and coping of low-income, urban, minority adolescents who are transitioning to ninth grade. This study clarifies the nature of high school transition and the complexity of social issues when entering a new building. Many students reported trying to stay out of fights, avoiding trouble, and trying to make friends as key concerns. As identified in related research, this study also presented the student-teacher relationship and family involvement as key elements in supporting student achievement during ninth grade transition.

Akos (2004) poses that the social aspects of transitioning from eighth to ninth grade may be as important as the academic adjustment that students face when entering high school. Hertzog and Morgan (1997) studied student perception during transition and identified a significant drop in five areas. The five areas include (a) physical appearance, (b) competence, (c) romantic appeal, (d) behavioral conduct, and (e) global self-worth. The students in this study named developing close friendships in high school as their number one priority. When it comes to school and education, the academic outcomes of adolescents are highly related to their social outcomes (Juvonen & Wentsel, 1996).
Academic Challenges

For many students, negotiating the transition to high school is challenging, particularly when it comes to academics. According to Akos (2004), students identified their top two fears associated with entering ninth grade and both were related to academics. The study revealed that they were most concerned about the amount of homework and the difficulty of homework.

Research indicates that middle school experience must prepare students for the challenges of high school, which includes taking college-preparatory level courses upon entering ninth grade. Bottoms and Cooney (2002) surveyed a cohort of students in grades eight and nine to identify experiences associated with achievement in higher-level high school courses. Three experiences were related to student success: studying algebra in the middle grades, reading many books in eighth grade, and having an expectation to graduate from college.

Procedural Challenges

One of the top three concerns of students entering high school is the fear of getting lost (Akos, 2004; Queen, 2002). Students entering high school face a larger campus, more students and an unfamiliar environment. The literature indicates that students have concerns related to procedural elements of a new school (Ascher, 2006; Eanes, 2005; Reents, 2002). Suggestions for supporting procedural changes of a new school include orientations, guided tours, and visits during the eighth grade school year.

Risk Factors for Dropping Out

Longitudinal data has been collected from several US school districts, including Chicago, Philadelphia and Fall River, a small urban district in Massachusetts. These
studies have allowed educators to identify risk factors and their impact on student dropout rates. As shown in Table 4, these district-level longitudinal studies identify the two risk factor categories as academic performance and educational engagement.

### Table 2.1

**Examples of Highly Predictive Risk Factors for Dropping Out of High School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Risk Factor</th>
<th>Chicago</th>
<th>Philadelphia</th>
<th>Fall River</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Performance</td>
<td>Receiving more than one grade of F in core academic course or not earning enough credits to be promoted during 9th grade</td>
<td>Earning an F in English or mathematics during 6th grade</td>
<td>Significant drop in grade point average from 8th to 9th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Failing one or more course during the 8th grade</td>
<td>Being retained in any grade during K-8 or in high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Entering 9th grade with math or reading scores below 8th grade level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Being retained in 9th grade</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Engagement</td>
<td>(n/a)</td>
<td>Low attendance (80% or lower during grade 6, 8 or 9</td>
<td>Significant drop in attendance beginning in 6th grade and worsening in subsequent years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Receiving a failing mark for classroom behavior during grade 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from Jerald (2006)

**The Chicago Study**

The Consortium on Chicago School Research conducts analyses using a longitudinal database that tracks every student who moves into and through the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). These data have allowed researchers to construct new and valuable indicators for predicting high school dropouts. This study revealed findings similar to other transition studies by identifying the significance of the ninth grade year and graduation within four years. For example, among students entering ninth grade in 1999, the four-year graduation for students promoted to tenth grade was 81%, compared with only 22% for those who did not pass the necessary classes in ninth grade (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).
Another significant finding was that although students who had high test scores in eighth grade were more likely to stay on-track when they got to ninth grade, their test scores were no guarantee for ninth grade success. In the 2003-04 freshman class, for example, of the students who entered with high assessment scores, almost one quarter were off-track for graduation by the end of their freshman year. On the other end, of the students who entered high school in the same year with very low eighth-grade assessment scores, more than 40% were on-track by the end of freshman year (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).

The Philadelphia Studies

The Philadelphia Educational Longitudinal Study (PELS) is a comprehensive database following a cohort of 2,000 students in the School District of Philadelphia from the close of their sixth-grade year in 1996 to three years past on-time graduation in 2003. There were 45 schools in Philadelphia randomly selected from a pool of 93. Students and their parents within those schools were randomly selected to participate in separate half-hour telephone interviews during the summer after the eighth-grade year. Both parents and students were re-interviewed during the fall/winter of the ninth grade year, during the summer after ninth grade, and after each subsequent school year until the fall/winter of 2003-2004, about six months after what would have been their fourth year in high school.

Researchers Balfanz and Herzog (2005), built a longitudinal database to follow this cohort of students and to track their progress. This project has produced several highly important findings including the identification of four powerful predictors of falling off-track to graduation. These predictors are (a) attending school 80% or less of the time, (b) receiving a poor final behavior mark, (c) failing Math, and (d) failing
English. According to the research, a sixth-grade student with any of the four indicators has only a 10% chance of graduating with their peers and a 20% chance of graduating the following year.

*The Fall River Study*

In a research project done during the 1990s, Roderick (1993) studied the academic performance, school engagement, and social background factors for a cohort of students beginning in fourth grade, as they eventually either dropped out of school or graduated on time with their cohort.

The study revealed that the district had two distinct types of dropouts—early and late dropouts. Roderick (1993) defined early dropouts as those who left school between seventh and ninth grade and late dropouts as those who left during tenth - twelfth grade. The significance with these two groups was that early dropouts started out with much lower grades in elementary school, while later dropouts (who made up 65% of all Fall River dropouts) had fourth grade attendance and grades that looked no different from students who would eventually graduate in the bottom third of the class. Roderick also revealed powerful evidence that the transition years to both middle and high school had a decisive impact on students who would later drop out. Roderick found that school engagement diverged in middle school; later dropouts experienced a dip in attendance during sixth grade and again through the ninth grade year.

All three studies revealed common patterns and crisis spots for predicting those students who will not graduate with their cohort. These studies also identified a certain set of general educational risk factors for dropping out. The Fall River, Chicago, and Philadelphia studies did not identify new factors, but confirmed general findings of
earlier studies. For example, Balfanz and Hertzog found that they could predict nearly half of all Philadelphia dropouts as early as sixth grade and the Chicago study found that their on-track indicator was 85% successful in predicting which members of the freshmen class would not graduate. Roderick’s Fall River study found that dropouts exhibit very different paths in their educational journey.

Since the on-track indicators can vary from district to district and school to school, this consortium data analysis supports the idea that high schools themselves play a substantial role in determining whether students stay on track, and these are risk factors independent of those that students bring with them when they enter (Jerald, 2006).

Transition Practices and Programs

The literature on transition-type programs for students entering ninth grade is vast. The ambiguity lies in defining what a transition program is. Many schools have program components, strategies or activities in place that support students as they transition to ninth grade. The literature discusses components and offers recommendations for establishing structures that support the academic and social needs of transitioning ninth graders. The Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) (2003) advises that successful transition and comprehensive programs include a written plan that engages a large group of stakeholders including parents, businesses, nonprofit organizations, unions, educators, politicians, and the community at large. The most effective transition programs are comprehensive and target activities to students, parents and teachers (Rice, 2001). They are usually defined as those that improve student attendance, achievement, and retention (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). To address the
needs of all students, studies reveal that effective transition programs have five or more diversified activities (Mac Iver, 1990).

According to MacIver (1990), a high school transition program is comprised of activities that (a) provide students and parents with information about the new school, (b) provide students with social support during the transition, and (c) bring middle school and high school staff together to learn about one another’s curriculum and expectations.

The National Middle School Association (NMSA) identifies four essential key actions to effective transition programs: (a) collaborating with eighth and ninth grade building personnel; (b) targeting early intervention to support academic recovery for failing students; (c) providing consistent information about the academic, social, and organizational similarities and differences between middle school and high school; and (d) offering information on the curriculum, facilities, safety, and discipline of the high school (2006).

*National High School Reform Models*

A policy brief by The National High School Center, entitled “State and District Level Support for Successful Transitions into High School” (2007) highlighted best practices and some current models that are experiencing success. This document identified five key challenges and strategies to support high school transition:

1. Establish a data monitoring system to diagnose why students are struggling
2. Address the instructional needs of unprepared incoming high school students
3. Personalize the learning environment to focus on individual students
4. Build capacity within low-performing schools to address diverse student needs
5. Create connections to the community, higher education, and employers to engage students and allow them to understand the relevance of their coursework.

The ninth grade transition has generated several models that are implemented in large urban districts. These models focus more on drop-out prevention strategies and include career components along with academic support.

*Talent Development High School*

One reform model, the Talent Development High School (TDHS) with Career Academies created to transform the structure and curriculum of large high schools in urban districts (McPartland & Jordan, 2002). The TDHS program out of Johns Hopkins University is a multi-phased reform model for large high schools that have serious problems of student attendance, discipline, achievement scores, and dropout rates. The program offers double doses of time in core subject areas as well as help after school and during the summer. This model also features contextual teaching and learning within the career academy structure. Students participate in work experiences and career internships. The TDHS model uses a multi-tiered system of teacher supports with teams and common planning time. They use six strategies for addressing ninth grade issues that include: (a) Separate physical setting for freshman only, (b) A team-teaching structure designed to divide the assistance effectively, (c) Incentives for students to attend school regularly and achieve academically, (d) A curricular regimen built upon the extended block school which was designed to help students overcome skill and knowledge deficiencies, (e) The “Twilight Academy,” a specialized program for ninth graders who failed, or experienced difficulty in the normal school setting, and (f) Ongoing coaching.
and professional development for teachers that is curriculum-specific and focuses on modeling lessons and providing strategies for learning and classroom management.

The TDHS model is a reform model that is mentioned most in the literature and is currently implemented in high schools in Baltimore, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington DC. The findings of the Talent Development Model reveal achievement in the areas of attendance, algebra passing rates, and an increase in promotion to tenth grade (Herlihy, 2007). Student participants in the TDHS model showed evidence of increased achievement and overall graduation rates were higher.

*Project Transition*

Project Transition focused on improving the experience of ninth graders at two high schools. Both high schools, one in Milwaukee and one in Kansas City, enrolled high shares of low-income students, including many struggling students. One of the project’s key elements was to establish a personalized school environment for teachers and students (Neild, 2009). Students from both schools reported that they knew and felt supported by their classmates. However, one school showed evidence of increased student achievement. The school with increased student scores had a collaborative instructional focus that was not implemented with fidelity at the other school. The Project Transition findings provide some clues that organizational changes are insufficient by themselves; there must also be a clear instructional focus.

School reform models have identified practices that have shown promise in improving ninth grade transitions and student success. It is important to note that all districts come with varying challenges, as they are comprised of different sizes and resources. Leaders at the district level have the ability to establish structures that will
meet the needs of the families and students they serve, structures that will support and promote student achievement. The research on school configuration is one example of district-level decision-making that has an impact on ninth grade transition.

*Developmental Considerations*

While early adolescence is most commonly associated with the middle school years, the great variability in maturity levels and rate of development between adolescents allows age to be used only as a rough estimate of developmental stages. The developmental stages of students in any ninth grade class may range from pre-adolescence to later adolescence. This may cause difficulties when fostering social integration and implementing design school programs that are developmentally appropriate. Adolescence is a time of change that brings important developmental tasks, experiences in significant growth and physical, emotional, social and cognitive development (Roderick, 1993; Braddock & McPartland, 1993; Alexander & George, 1981).

Guided by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002) and Stage-Environment Fit (Eccles et al., 1989), M. Zimmer-Gembeck, H. Chipuer, M. Hanisch, P. Creed, and L. McGregor examined whether student competence was supported by relationships at school and school fit. As hypothesized, school fit partially mediated the association between peer relationships and academic engagement. The engagement factor fully directed the path from school fit to achievement. This study was done using standard error of mean and bootstrapping. The techniques used in this study allowed for firm conclusions about the importance of multidimensional experiences in adolescent competence (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2006).
Establishing organizational practices and structures based on the developmental needs of adolescents can promote a culture of learning that supports ninth grade success. The personalized environment created by practices like small learning communities, interdisciplinary teaming, and advisory programs can provide students with positive relationships and a sense of belonging, as opposed to the more common feelings of anonymity and isolation, resulting in school engagement and student success (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Alexander & George, 1981; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2006). Many researchers believe that the environmental mismatch within a school and the developmental issues of adolescence may be associated with some of the negative changes that occur within the transition to high school (Wolraich, Drotar, Howard, 2007).

To further emphasize the importance of the school environment to adolescent development, researchers have identified a strong link between school experiences and developmental outcomes. Roderick (1993) argues that much of adolescents’ identity formation is based upon school experiences. Their academic performance, their perception of their academic abilities compared with their peers, feelings of belonging to peer groups, and acceptance by friends and teachers, all impact their view of themselves. Roderick poses that since the majority of these perceptions are bound to school experiences, positive developmental outcomes are linked to a positive school experience (1993). Additionally, research has found that young adolescents may experience a decline in motivation and general attitudes towards school throughout this time period, especially at times of school transition (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Research suggests that
the school climate and environment are good predictors of student performance and achievement (Alspaugh, 1998, Eccles et al., Smith, 1997).

Teacher-Student Relationships

Barber and Olsen (2004) compared the middle school and high school transition in the same population of youth over four consecutive grade transitions. The main purpose of this study was to assess the extent to which perceived changes in the school environment were responsible for the changes in levels of student performance at the various transitions. Barber and Olsen used the analytical method employed by Seidman et al. (1996) to test the relationship between perceived school environment at grade or grade plus school transitions and student functioning in the transition year. Barber and Olsen used the school environment as a conceptual frame to select variables for testing student functioning at transition. Organized in three general categories of insight, the study offered the following findings: (1) Student functioning across time, (2) School change across time, and (3) Linking the school environment to student functioning.

Barber and Olsen (2004) assessed, at every grade, the degree to which students experienced connection, respect for psychological autonomy and regulation (school organization, teacher monitoring). Also included in the study was a single-item assessment of the degree to which students liked school in every grade. This study identified several elements of the school environment that had an impact on student functioning. The prime element identified through the four-year study was the teacher-student relationship. The degree to which students felt supported by their teachers, both inside and outside of school, most consistently predicted their reported functioning. The
level of perceived teacher support explained significant variance in numerous aspects of student academic, personal, and interpersonal functioning.

*Family Involvement*

Along with providing parents and students with specific information about the high school, researchers recommend several activities to acclimate students and their families. Some suggestions include: providing school visits in the spring, tours, small-group sessions with high school counselors, and designating willing parents as ninth grade ambassadors to formally and informally communicate with incoming parents (Epstein, 2005; MacIver, 1990).

A recent study (Lohman, Kaura & Newman, 2007) compared the relationships among levels of family and school differentiation to the externalizing and internalizing behaviors, peer group membership, and academic achievement of 693 middle and high school students. High levels of family and school differentiation were correlated with all measures of well-being. Individuals with low family and low school differentiation had the lowest academic achievement, whereas individuals in the high family and high school differentiation had highest academic achievement. Students in the mismatched group, who had high differentiation with parents, but low differentiation with school, had lower grade point averages, higher school absences, and higher disciplinary actions than those in the mismatched group with high school differentiation and low parent differentiation. This study revealed that students who feel connected to their school have been associated with high motivation for academic achievement.

Family and teacher support plays a significant role in the success of students as they progress throughout their first year of high school. However, it is the school building
leaders that promote student achievement by establishing structures that support the academic and social needs of ninth graders (Lohman, Kaura & Newman, 2007). There are reform models and program practices that have shown promise, but there is much to discover about how to help support student success in ninth grade and to keep them on track for graduation. It is the responsibility of building principals to put the structures in place and provide curricula, organizational features, and effective teachers to support all ninth grade students.

Role of the Administrator in Ninth grade Transition

The principal is the school leader and the most important person during the transition period at school (Queen, 2002). It is the principal that is responsible for all activities that occur in and around the school. In addition to establishing daily structures, the principal has control over establishing guidelines that will assist in making the ninth grade transition easier. The principal possesses the ability to establish a supportive school climate by creating systems to support, monitor, and evaluate the transition process. According to McPartland and Jordan (2002) from Johns Hopkins University, there are three broad categories of change that educational leaders should have in place to support any reform effort. They include: (a) Structural, organizational, and governance changes to establish the school norms and interpersonal relations for learning, (b) Curriculum and instructional innovations to give individual students the necessary time and help for success at a high standards program, and (c) Teacher support systems to provide opportunities for faculty input and continuous backing to implement ambitious changes.
Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) in their book, *School Leadership That Works*, state that an effective principal is a necessary precondition for an effective school. They illustrate that point by including a 1977 U.S. Senate Committee Report on Equal Educational Opportunity (U.S. Congress, 1970) that identified the principal as the single most influential person in a school. Marzano et al. (2005) provide strong guidance on specific leadership behaviors for school leaders and suggest that those behaviors have well-documented effects on student achievement.

Many high school principals are addressing middle-to-high-school-transition using a variety of transitional events that involve students, parents and teachers from middle and high schools. These events range from one-time informational assemblies for incoming students to comprehensive meetings among teachers, counselors and administrators of both schools. Other programs involve informational parent meetings and course advising sessions. Although most schools use some combination of these transition activities, few implement transition programs that involve students, parents, and faculty from both schools, providing complete support.

The Center for Equity and Excellence in Education at George Washington University (GW-CEEE), a team that conducts national and local policy and applied research in the area of school reform, further supports the NMSA research by making the following recommendations: (a) Ensure that curriculum standards are aligned to prepare eighth-grade students for the challenge of high school work; (b) Communicate the importance of literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies through policy and funding initiatives; (c) Prepare teachers for teaching challenging content in the middle grades; (d) Provide structures to support middle school students with the extra help they
need for success in high school; and (e) Ensure that middle school leaders are prepared to implement a program that prepares all students for the transition to college preparatory course in high school (CEEE, 2009).

Some of the research has examined what districts are doing to support ninth grade transition. One study by Kerr (2000) surveyed 174 schools to learn about the kinds of programs and practices Maryland high school principals are currently using to ease the transition to high school. Data from the survey also included outcome measures of attendance and promotion rates. Kerr provided findings about effective school organizational practices to ease the transition into high school. The study identified that high poverty, high minority schools using the school-within-a-school practice, and those that were using it in a sustained way, showed substantial improvement on promotion, dropout, and achievement outcomes.

**Organizational Practices to Support Transition**

The transition study by Kerr (2000) was done using organizational practice variables that were identified as communal practices versus bureaucratic school practices. The distinction between bureaucratic and communal organizations are that bureaucratic schools are often considered more formal with a structured division of labor, while communal organizations tend to focus more on personal relationships and experiences that connect students and teachers. According to Bryk & Driscoll (1988), schools with a communal organization tend to have teachers that are less specialized and attend more to personal and academic concerns of students. It is clear from the research that successful schools need to establish both communal and bureaucratic characteristics, addressing the
personal relationships of the school community and the structures necessary to meet the educational needs of students.

The organizational practices that Kerr (2000) defined as contributing to a communal school organization, and that were included in the survey, are prominent in the research on developing a school community that focuses on relationships and the individual needs of students. The following concluding paragraphs describe some of these organizational practices in more detail.

Small Learning Community

Research has provided educators with models to increase student achievement. One model, a school-within-a-school, is sometimes called a learning community or a cluster. This model is often used in large schools to help downsize the number of students to a manageable number for teachers and administrators. Some advantages of small learning communities (SLC) are improvements in attendance, student achievement, behavior, attainment, teacher morale, and parental contact (DeWees, 1999).

Block Scheduling and Double Dosing

Researchers identify block scheduling as one of seven primary indicators of major restructuring occurring at the high school level (Cawelti, 1994). In a study by Cawelti, block scheduling was defined as having at least part of the daily schedule organized into larger blocks of time to allow flexibility for varied instructional activities (1994). Canady & Rettig (1995) concur that the exact way block scheduling occurs is not important but rather that there exists flexibility to meet the needs of students. Block scheduling allows for longer periods of classroom instruction within a shorter length of time. Many agree that block scheduling offers a more personalized experience for students since they have
fewer teachers and classes to prepare for during the school day. This type of schedule also allows students to take four courses for 90 minutes daily with each one-semester course equaling full credit toward graduation (Herlihy, 2007).

By increasing classroom time in core areas like math and English, block schedules may provide students with double credits by the end of the year. The Talent Development program offers Strategic Reading and transition to Advanced Math in the fall semester as a bridge to prepare students for English 1 and Algebra in the spring semester (NHSC, 2007).

**Differentiated Instruction**

Tomlinson (2005) describes the underpinnings of effective differentiation as teaching practices that ensure: (a) learning environments are both safe and challenging for each student; (b) teaching and learning routines include whole class, small group, and individual attention; (c) Learning goals are clearly designated and pursued to ensure focus on the essential knowledge, understanding, and skill in a topic or discipline; (d) pre-assessments or ongoing assessments inform teachers’ instructional plans; (e) teachers use time, space, materials, and strategies in flexible ways to address varied learner needs; and (f) classrooms become communities of learning in which students share the responsibility for respect, optimum operation, and maximum individual growth.

Differentiated instruction is a philosophy of teaching asserting that students learn best when their teachers effectively address differences in students’ readiness levels, interests, and learning styles.
Teaching Responsibility and Civility

Academic subjects are essential, but they do not prepare young people to be functioning citizens. Systemic programs like School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (SW-PBS) provide educators with a framework for teaching character education and behavioral expectations. SW-PBS is an approach to student discipline that is characterized by multiple levels of support to encourage social and academic success (Horner, Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005). The foundation of SW-PBS comes from providing all students universal prevention and is structured with the following components: (a) three-five positively stated behavioral statements are established, (b) expectations are taught to the entire student body, and (c) behaviors are monitored and rewarded. Universal prevention is designed to provide a basic level of support for all students, in all settings of the school (Horner et al., 2005).

Summary

The difference of structures and expectations creates a challenge for these adolescents, as middle school focuses on teaching and nurturing the whole child, while high school is focused on instructing students to learn the contents of academic courses (Collins, 2005). Grades become more important than relationships; teachers and peers become more diverse; and curricular and extracurricular activities become more demanding (Feldlaufer et al., 1988). All of this seems to interfere with social networks, self-confidence, and support systems (Barone et al., 1991; Hertzog et al, 1996).

Establishing organizational practices and structures based on the developmental needs of adolescents can promote a culture of learning that supports ninth grade success. The personalized environment created by practices like small learning communities,
interdisciplinary teaming, and advisory programs can provide students with positive relationships and a sense of belonging, instead of the more common feelings of anonymity and isolation, resulting in school engagement and student success (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Alexander & George, 1981; Zimmer-Gembeck, et al., 2006). [G1]
Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

Organizations including the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the National Middle School Association (NMSA) have identified the need for educational leaders to implement structures that support students as they transition to high school. Researchers have identified organizational structures that may help create a sense of community within a school, leading to less student alienation and lower dropout rates (2008). Although much of the research discussed programs that addressed the academic and social needs of students, little is known about the extent to which these ninth grade transition practices have been used by high school principals in New York State. The purpose of this study was to learn about the kinds of practices or transition-type program components that NYS high school principals have been using with their ninth graders.

Current research on high school reform has identified specific school practices that promote a culture of school community and bring about improved outcomes for high school students. In a ninth grade transition study, Kerri Kerr (2000) identified nine organizational practices that promote a communal environment, then surveyed principals in the state of Maryland to identify the practices that were being implemented. Kerr proposed the theory that ninth graders’ developmental needs, as well as the support they needed for a successful transition to high school, were best met by a learning
environment that fostered a strong sense of community, including the practices put forward by proponents of communal school organization.

This research project also focused on the nine practices used in the Kerr study. These practices represented educational experiences linked with communal school organization. These practices are (1) organizing student into a small learning community, (2) interdisciplinary teaming of teachers, (3) homeroom or advisory periods for students, (4) heterogeneous grouping of students who share a common core curriculum, (5) extended class periods, (6) the use of student-centered instructional practices, (7) an extra class or double dose of a core class, (8) a special curriculum or class for ninth graders to help them learn the necessary skills for high school, and (9) a summer program for entering ninth graders.

This study also included the additional practice of emphasizing school-wide focus on teaching expectations, responsibility and civility. While this additional practice was not included in the Maryland study with Kerr, it has been discussed in the research literature and also promoted a communal school organization. Together, these ten practices made up the set of transition practices used in high schools to support ninth grade transition.

Research Context

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) has been responsible for the supervision of all public schools in New York State. Measures of student participation, achievement and background characteristics have been collected from each school and reported on an annual basis by the New York State Education Department in the Basic Education Data System (BEDS) report. This source provided the NYSED with
information about each high school surveyed (school size, average student socio-
economic status, and race/ethnicity composition), as well as outcome measures of
dropout rates, school-wide attendance rates, and percentage of ninth graders who passed
the Algebra Regents Exam.

On an annual basis, the NYSED disseminates summaries of the examination
results so that they could compare the results to school administrators so they can
compare the results for their schools and/or school districts with those of other schools,
school districts, and various reference groups. These summaries outline information on
the number of students taking and passing each examination, as well as the percent of the
enrollment taking each examination. In addition to these summaries, tables of percentile
equivalents have been provided to school administrators.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) provides a general
understanding of the NYS public school structure and the individuals who attended. One
reason for surveying NYS high school principals was the diversity of the composition of
the state. Also, as viewed in table 3.1, there has been a strong degree of similarity
between the demographics of New York State and the United States of America.

The Consolidated State Performance Report has given the percentage of high
school students who graduated as reported by the state. In 2006, the New York State high
school graduation rate was 77%. The average freshman graduation rate was unknown
since it was not reported by all high schools in NYS. Averaged Freshman Graduation
Rate (AFGR) was a reliable definition for comparing across the states the percentage of
students who graduated on time; however one obstacle was that not all states (including
NYS) have required high schools to report ninth grade promotion or graduation rates.
New York State did not have this information since ninth grade graduation has not been clearly defined.

Table 3.1

*Demographic Comparison: 2006–07*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>New York</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Students</td>
<td>2,815,581</td>
<td>49,676,964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-Income Students</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficient</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2

*Public Secondary Schools, by State or Jurisdiction: 2006–07*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State or jurisdiction</th>
<th>Total, all</th>
<th>All regular</th>
<th>Grades 9-12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>23,436</td>
<td>19,379</td>
<td>14,324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>1,088</td>
<td>965</td>
<td>684</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2008)

Participants

Contact information from the Directory of Public Schools and Administrators for the State of New York was used to e-mail principals explaining the purpose and procedure of the study. These participants included 482 high school principals of NYS who have led buildings where ninth grade was the beginning grade of their school. New York City principals were excluded from this study based on time limitations and the
additional requirements for attaining permission to survey district employees. This study attempted to receive at least a 20% response to the online survey and the response rate was 25.1%. The participants were chosen because they had incoming ninth graders who transitioned from another building.

Recruitment

One advantage of online survey research is the ability of the Internet to provide access to groups and individuals who would have been difficult to reach through other channels (Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1999) and was also a way of recruiting participants who would not have the time to meet in person. Principals were often busy, and it was important that the e-mail message clearly communicated the purpose and format of the study.

The recruitment process for this study included the following introductory message: (1) information about the format, (2) the anticipated length of time needed to respond to the survey, (3) a statement informing participants that the survey results will remain confidential and, (4) the survey link. As a follow up, those principals who did not respond within one week of the initial e-mail received a follow-up e-mail message inviting them to take the survey. This message included a similar introductory message that invited participants to take the survey and directed them to a web link.

Structure of Online Survey

This survey identified the organizational practices in place to support ninth-grade transition and those practices that principals would implement if they were granted the necessary resources. As principals of NYS high schools, the research participants were
moderately-to-highly-invested in the topic, the research objectives were reasonable in length and participant confidentiality was ensured (Mangione, 1995; Lockhart, 1984).

Measures

Part I asked participants to identify the organizational practices that they had in place to support ninth grade transition. These items included ten communal organizational practices identified as best practice for supporting a school community and ninth grade transition. These practices were (1) small learning communities for ninth graders, (2) interdisciplinary teaming of teachers, (3) homeroom or advisory groups for students, (4) heterogeneous grouping, (5) extended class periods or block schedule, (6) majority of teachers using strategies of differentiated instruction, (7) extra subject period or double dose of core class, (8) a special class for ninth graders to help learn the skills to be successful in high school, (9) a summer school program for ninth graders, and (10) a school-wide focus on teaching expectations along with responsibility and civility. For each of the practices, this section also asked participants to identify the number of years it has been in place and whether the practice was for all students or only for at-risk students.

Question 2 in this section asked participants to describe any other practices that they had in place to support ninth grade transition that they would recommend to other high school principals. Question 3 listed the above practices and asked the participants to check those practices that they would like to put in place if they had the necessary resources. Question 4 asked the participants to identify to what degree ninth grade transition has been a problem in their school. The last question in this section asked
participants to compare other initiatives and to describe if there was (a) less, (b) about the same, or (c) more attention given to ninth grade transition.

Part II included two questions about the number and configuration of the schools feeding into the high school.

Part III of the survey asked about the demographics of the district and the high school. There were five questions to identify the size, structure, student population, and principal experience. The last two questions in this section included comment boxes asking for the name of the high school and what they perceived as necessary to improve ninth grade transition.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data from the surveys has been collected and compiled into SPSS software for statistical analysis. The research questions have been analyzed using cross tabulation between the ten practices and the variables associated with the characteristics of the principal, school and district. Next, the researcher ran a k-means cluster analysis to summarize the variables. The center values for each cluster have been reported. A multinomial logistic regression model has been used to predict cluster membership based on school and principal variables.

For the open-ended questions, qualitative data has been analyzed using steps proposed by Creswell (2003). The first step was to read through the responses to get an overall sense of the meaning. The next steps included organizing the data, coding responses and developing themes and categories (Creswell, 2003).
Summary

This chapter has described the data and methods used in this research project. In sum, this dissertation posed two important research questions concerning the current practices used by high school principals to support ninth grade transition and those practices principals would implement if they had the necessary resources. Quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques were used to address these questions. The following chapters describe the analyses of the responses to both research questions. In the summary discussion, the researcher makes recommendations for educators, researchers and policy makers to consider based on the findings, when addressing the topic of ninth grade transition.
Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to identify research-based practices that are being implemented by principals across New York State for students transitioning into ninth-grade. This study addressed many of the identified gaps by conducting a state-wide survey of principals on the implementation of transition practices that support student success in ninth grade. In particular, the research questions were:

1. What are the current program components being implemented by New York State high school principals to support ninth grade transition?

2. Which program components would principals most likely implement to support ninth grade transition if afforded the necessary resources?

An online survey was used to collect data about what principals are currently using to support ninth grade transition and what practices they would want to use if they were afforded the necessary resources. Public High School principals of New York State who had ninth grade students transitioning in their building were contacted via email and invited to participate in the online study. Principals in the New York City public school system were excluded from this study based on time limitations and the additional requirements for attaining permission to survey district employees. The survey was sent on December 1, 2010 and was open until December 15, 2010. The survey was reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Human Subjects Review Board.
Description of Sample

During the 2009-10 school year there were 481 New York State secondary principals (excluding New York City) responsible for ninth grade students transitioning to high school. The survey population of principals yielded 121 responses. One response was unusable because the participant checked the no consent box. The response rate was 25.1%. Twenty-one responses were unusable because the participant chose not to answer the organizational practice questions which are at the core of this research study. The analytic sample consisted of 99 usable surveys.

Table 4.1

Distribution by Principal Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Experience</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - 5 Years</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10 Years</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11+ Years</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N of valid cases is 97.

Table 4.1 shows the distribution of respondents by years of experience as a high school principal. Thirty-one respondents (32%) have been principals less than five years. Forty-two respondents (43.3%) have been high school principals for 6-10 years. Twenty-four respondents (24.8%) have 11 or more years of experience as a principal.

School Districts of New York State

There are five types of school districts within New York State that provide, arrange or contract for all public education. These district types are; common school
district, union free school district, central school district, central high school district and city school district. There are approximately 700 school districts in the state. Central school districts are the most prevalent type of district in New York State. Table 4.2 shows the breakdown of these districts.

Table 4.2

*NYS Five District Types and Number of Districts Within Each Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Type</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City School Districts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cities more than 125,000 (Big 5)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cities less than 125,000</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlarged City School Districts</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central City School Districts</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central High School Districts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9 - 12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Free School Districts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades K - 12</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than K - 12</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional (Special Act)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central School Districts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades K -12</td>
<td>458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Than K - 12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common School Districts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than K - 12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 4 (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K - 6 (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K - 2 (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K - 8 (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Operating</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Districts</td>
<td>697</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(NYSED, 2010)

Table 4.2 shows that there are a total of 697 districts within New York State.

With 460 districts, central school districts make up the majority (66%) of districts in the state. There are a total of 62 City schools including the “big 5” city districts (New York
City, Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse and Yonkers) and 57 other smaller city school
districts. Common and union free districts make up 172 districts. Table 4.2 shows the
distribution based on two categories central districts and all other districts.

Table 4.3

_Distribution Comparison to Number of NYS Schools Within District Type_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Type School Districts</th>
<th>Respondent schools</th>
<th>NYS Public Schools*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other districts</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central districts</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>76.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Excluding NYC schools.

Table 4.3 shows the distribution of respondents based on the number of schools in
central districts and all other types of districts. Of the principals who responded, 76.3%
were from schools in small to large central school districts. There were 23.6%
respondents from all other districts. This sampling represents a majority of central school
districts and is consistent with the educational structures of New York State. There are
2568 schools in small to large central school districts and 713 schools in city districts.
These statistics do not include the 2170 schools in New York City.
Table 4.4

*Respondent School Configuration*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>95.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* N of valid cases is 95.

Table 4.5 shows the school configurations for the high schools receiving ninth grade students. There were 91 respondents (95.8%) from a 9-12 grade configuration. The remaining respondents (4.3%) represent another configuration, including schools with ninth grade only. The majority of respondents were from high schools with a 9-12 grade configuration.

Table 4.5

*Feeder School Quantity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Feeder Schools</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 School</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>86.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Schools</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 or more Schools</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* N of valid cases is 98.
Schools that send students to a high school are known as feeder schools. Respondents were asked to identify how many feeder schools were sending students to their high school. Table 4.5 shows these numbers. Eighty-five respondents (86.7%) are receiving students from one feeder school as they enter ninth-grade. Eight respondents (8.2%) are receiving students from two schools. Five respondents (5.1%) are receiving students from three or more feeder schools. The majority of respondents are receiving students from a single feeder school. Table 4.6 shows the grade configurations for the feeder schools.

Table 4.6

**Feeder School Configuration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades offered at feeder school</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* N of valid cases is 93.

Respondents were asked to identify the grade configuration of their feeder schools. Table 4.6 shows the grade configurations of the schools feeding into the respondents’ schools. The most prevalent configuration was the Grade 6-8 model that made up 55.6% of the responding schools. Schools that offered grade 5-8 and grade 7-8
were also common. These three configurations make up the majority (83.9%) of schools and indicate that the majority of incoming ninth graders were from some type of middle school and had at least one prior transition.

Table 4.7

Distribution by Size of School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>NYS HS n</th>
<th>NYS HS %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;500</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501 - 999</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000 - 1500</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;1500</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* N of valid cases is 97. NYS HS represents the total NYS high schools that have ninth grade students entering their building as first year students. NYS HS n of valid cases is 481.

Table 4.7 shows the distribution of respondents by number of students in their school. Ten respondents were principals in schools with more than 1,500 students (10.3%). Twenty-four respondents were principals in schools with 1000-1,500 students (24.7%). Thirty-four respondents were principals in schools with between 501-999 students (34.3%). Twenty-nine respondents were principals in schools with fewer than 500 students. This distribution of respondents is comparable to New York State high school data. Schools with student enrollment between 501-1500 accounted for 57.6% of secondary school principal respondents. New York State secondary schools with student enrollment between 501-1500 account for 59.8% of all secondary schools.
### Table 4.8

*Free and Reduced Priced Lunch (FARPL)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Population Receiving FARPL</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>NYS n</th>
<th>NYS %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;25%</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25% - 50%</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;50%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* N of valid cases is 97. NYS is the reported data of districts receiving FARPL (2008, NYSED).

Table 4.8 shows the distribution of respondents by the percentage of their students receiving free and reduced lunch. The last two columns of this table show the number of districts in New York State by percentage of their students receiving free and reduced lunch. These data support that the distribution of respondents is generally consistent with state averages.

Fifty respondents (52.1%) reported that less than 25% of their students receive free and reduced lunch. This is compared with New York State district data, having 39.7% of the districts with less than 25% of their students receiving FARPL. This distribution is roughly comparable to state free and reduced priced lunch (FARPL) data with a slightly higher percentage of schools with fewer students receiving free and reduced lunch participating in this study.
Answering Research Question 1:

*What program components being currently implemented by New York State high school principals to support ninth grade transition?*

The ten transition practices that were identified in the survey as practices that support ninth grade transition are listed in Table 4.9. The practices were: small learning communities (SLC), interdisciplinary teaming of teachers (IDT), homeroom or advisory period (ADVP), heterogeneous grouping with common core curriculum (CCC), block schedule (BLKS) differentiated instruction (DI), double dose of core class (DD), a special class for ninth graders (SCNG), summer school (SS), and a school-wide focus on expectations/ Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS). All ten practices were selected for the survey because they are research-based practices that support ninth graders in a school environment that is communal versus bureaucratic in structure. Table 4.9 includes a list of each transition practice, its abbreviation, and a brief description.

Table 4.10 shows the number and percentage of respondents who are implementing the transition practice. The two practices that were most likely to be implemented by all respondents were differentiated instruction (75.8%), and heterogeneous grouping with common core curriculum (65.7%). The two practices that were least likely to be implemented by the respondents were summer school (31.3%) and a special ninth grade course preparing students for high school (30.3%).
Table 4.9

Ninth grade Transition Practices and Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small Learning Communities</td>
<td>SLC</td>
<td>A small learning community is sometimes called a school-within-a-school, learning community or a cluster. This model is often used in large schools to help downsize the number of students to a manageable number for teachers and administrators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary Teaming</td>
<td>IDT</td>
<td>Teachers from different disciplines share a group of students and work together to support, plan and provide instruction during a common planning time (Alexander &amp; George, 1981).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory Groups/ Homeroom</td>
<td>ADVG</td>
<td>Homerooms usually are put in place to take attendance, and go over announcements. Advisory groups are planned to establish a connection between teacher and students. Although advisory groups and homerooms are not necessarily synonymous, this practice identifies a non-instructional period in the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Core Curriculum</td>
<td>CCC</td>
<td>Instead of offering a variety of ability-based tracks, CCC provides a single core curriculum for all students that are heterogeneously grouped for instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block Scheduling</td>
<td>BLKS</td>
<td>Block scheduling allows for longer periods of classroom instruction within a shorter length of time. Many agree that block scheduling offers a more personalized experience for students since they have fewer teachers and classes to prepare for during the school day. This type of schedule also allows students to take four courses for 90 minutes daily with each one-semester course equaling full credit toward graduation (Herlihy, 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiated Instruction</td>
<td>DI</td>
<td>Differentiated instruction is a philosophy of teaching asserting that students learn best when their teachers effectively address differences in students’ readiness levels, interests and learning styles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Dose of Core Subject</td>
<td>DD</td>
<td>NYS schools provide students who are at risk of failing state assessments with a double dose of support in the form of Academic Intervention and Support (AIS). This gives students a double dose or 2 class periods to work on certain core subjects. Some schools use block scheduling to provide students with double credits in core classes like Math or English by the end of the year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Class for Ninth grade</td>
<td>SCNG</td>
<td>A special class for ninth graders to help learn the necessary skills to be successful in high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer School Program</td>
<td>SS</td>
<td>Most summer school programs are for low-performing students to receive instruction around course content and skill building to avoid repeating a grade. Quality summer school programs provide low-performing students an opportunity to narrow the achievement gap between them and more successful students. Some ninth grade students attend summer programs to prepare them with the skills necessary for becoming a successful high school student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-Wide Positive Behavior</td>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>Systemic programs like School-Wide Positive Behavior Support provide educators with a framework for teaching character education and behavioral expectations. SW-PBIS is an approach to student discipline that is characterized by multiple levels of support to encourage social and academic success (Horner, Sugai, Todd, &amp; Lewis-Palmer, 2005).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.10

*Transition Practices Being Implemented by Schools*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition practice</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DI</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>75.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCC</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADVP</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLC</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDT</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DD</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLKS</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCNG</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Level of Implementation

Table 4.11 shows the percentage of respondents who are currently implementing the practice at a universal level. This represents the percentage of respondents who are implementing the practice for all students in their ninth grade. The practice that was most likely to be implemented universally was PBIS, a school-wide focus on teaching expectations / responsibility and civility (93.5%). The practice that respondents tended to use as a targeted approach was a summer school program (SS), (29%).

Table 4.11

Practices Impacting All Ninth Grade Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition Practice</th>
<th>Implementing schools providing practice to all students %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>93.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLKS</td>
<td>84.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCC</td>
<td>81.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADVP</td>
<td>79.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI</td>
<td>77.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDT</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLC</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCNG</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DD</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Percentage of all those who implemented the practice
Table 4.12 shows the percentage of respondents who have been implementing the practice for two years or more. The practice that was most often implemented for two years or more was block scheduling (BLKS), (93.8%). The special ninth grade class (SCNG) had the fewest implementers (Table 4.10) and only 66.7% of those respondents have been implementing the practice for more than two years.

Table 4.12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition Practice</th>
<th>Implementing schools using practice greater than 2 years %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BLKS</td>
<td>93.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>90.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCC</td>
<td>81.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADVP</td>
<td>77.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDT</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DD</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI</td>
<td>72.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLC</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>69.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCNG</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.13 shows the responses from the open-ended survey question. These are the practices that were identified as being implemented to support ninth grade transition. This table identifies responses from the following survey question: “Describe any other
practices that you have in place to support ninth graders that you would recommend to other high school principals.” This survey question was intended to gather practices other than the ten organizational practices that were provided in the previous survey section. A mentoring program and orientation program were most recommended with 13 responses. A variety of interventions were mentioned for struggling students. Packaged transition programs that are supported by outside vendors (LINK, Ignition and Strive) were identified by seven respondents.

Table 4.13

*Item Responses: Practices Recommended by Principals*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring program</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation program</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interventions for at risk students</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Packaged orientation program (Strive, Ignition, LINK)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading support</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor meetings</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Team</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fieldtrip</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman studies course</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track and monitor performance data</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions that reiterate original practices</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Answering Research Question 2:

*Which program components would principals most likely implement to support ninth grade transition if afforded the necessary resources?*

In order to identify the practice that is most wanted by principals of New York State it is also necessary to consider what is already being implemented. For example, differentiated instruction (DI) is being implemented by 75.8% of the respondents. Of those respondents who were not implementing DI, 68.2% would want to implement the practice if afforded the necessary resources. There were 90% of the respondents who either had DI in place or wanted to implement the practice.

A special class for ninth grade students (SCNG) is being implemented by 30.3% of the principals who responded. Of those respondents who are not implementing SCNG, 59.1% would want to implement the practice if afforded the necessary resources. This means that 72% of respondents either have SCNG in place or want to implement the practice.

There were 40% of the respondents who wanted SCNG but did not have it in place. Also, 16.4% of the respondents wanted to have DI but did not have it in place. These results indicated that DI was implemented by the majority of principals who wanted it and SCNG is wanted by more principals than were implementing the practice. The following tables will show the results of all ten practices.

Table 4.14 represent the transition practices that the respondents would want to implement if afforded the necessary resources. There were 47 respondents who chose a special class for ninth graders (SCNG) to help them learn the skills necessary for high school (51.6%). Interdisciplinary teaming of teachers (IDT) was selected by 45.1% of
the respondents. Summer school was chosen by 24.2%. Some practices like common core curriculum scored lower (14.3%) with principals who wanted to implement the practice, because they may already have the practice in place. Common core curriculum had a low rate of desirability by principals because it already had a high implementation rate.

Table 4.14

Organizational Practices wanted by NYS Principals if afforded the resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A special class for ninth graders</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary teaming of teachers</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small learning communities</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra subject period, or double dose of a core class</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory period or group</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A school-wide focus on teaching expectations (PBIS)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiated Instruction</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended class periods or block schedule</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A summer school program for ninth graders</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterogeneous grouping/ common core curriculum</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.14 includes the practices wanted by principals if they were afforded the necessary resources. Table 4.15 includes the responses from principals who were non-
implementers of the respective practices. The percentages are of non-implementers only who would want to implement the practice if they were afforded the necessary resources.

Table 4.15

*Organizational Practices wanted by Non-Implementing NYS Principals*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition practice</th>
<th>Non-implementing respondents</th>
<th>Non-implementing respondents wanting practice %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DI</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>68.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCNG</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>59.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDT</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>53.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADVP</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLC</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DD</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>48.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLKS</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCC</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.15 shows the number of non-implementing respondents with each practice. The right column indicates the percentage of non-implementing respondents who would want the practice if afforded the necessary resources. Although Differentiated Instruction had the highest percentage wanting the practice, it has the fewest respondents (24) who are non-implementers. The special class for ninth grade
(SCNG) had the greatest number of non-implementers (69) and the second highest percentage of those who would want the practice (59.1%). It was the most wanted practice by non-implementers.

Table 4.16

*Item Responses: Other Practices Wanted if Afforded the Necessary Resources*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community and College mentoring programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study skills and reading program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer tutoring and mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility with course requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earlier access to hands on learning (BOCES)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology integration at all levels / supporting core curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit recovery program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Measures have been edited for clarity as required.

Table 4.16 identifies responses from an open-ended question asking principals to identify other practices that were not listed that they would be interested in implementing. Responses for this question included mentoring programs and community partnerships. Some respondents included career-focused and credit recovery programs.

*Scope of the Problem Between District Types*

Ninth grade transition is a problem that is given varying attention among districts. One way to break down the differences was to look at central districts versus all other school districts. Table 4.17 shows a comparison between types of districts and their attention to ninth grade transition. The schools identified as other than central districts
are made up of city school districts of varying sizes. The central district category
includes all respondent schools from small to large central school districts. Table 4.17
identifies the level of attention that is placed on ninth grade transition between district
types.
Table 4.17

Initiative Comparison between District Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of School District</th>
<th>Less n (%)</th>
<th>About the same n (%)</th>
<th>More n (%)</th>
<th>( x^2 )</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other Districts</td>
<td>4 (18.2)</td>
<td>5 (22.7)</td>
<td>13 (59.1)</td>
<td>22.8(^a)</td>
<td>.011*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Districts</td>
<td>14 (20.0)</td>
<td>33 (47.1)</td>
<td>23 (32.9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18 (19.6)</td>
<td>38 (41.3)</td>
<td>36 (39.1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001. N of valid cases is 92.

The survey asked principals to identify whether ninth grade transition was given
less, about the same, or more attention than other school initiatives. Table 4.17 shows
59.1% of the principals from schools other than central districts responded that their
district gave more attention to ninth grade transition than other district initiatives,
compared to 39.1% of the central district school principals. There is a significant
difference between types of school districts and the level of attention that is given to
ninth grade transition.
Table 4.18

Transition as a Problem between District Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of School District</th>
<th>Not a Problem</th>
<th>Moderate Problem</th>
<th>Large Problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Districts</td>
<td>1 (4.5)</td>
<td>12 (54.5)</td>
<td>9 (41.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Districts</td>
<td>27 (38.0)</td>
<td>40 (56.3)</td>
<td>4 (5.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001. N of valid cases is 93.

The respondents were asked if ninth grade transition was not a problem, was a moderate problem, or was a large problem for their school. Table 4.18 shows problem level by schools within central or other districts. There is a large statistical significant difference between the perceived problem levels of ninth grade transition depending on the type of school district. The table shows 41% of school principals from other than central districts thought ninth grade transition was a large problem compared to 5.7% of school principals from central districts. The total percent of other district type schools that described ninth grade transition as a moderate to large problem was 96.5% compared to only 62% of the central district schools who described the transition as moderate to large problem.

Cluster Analysis Using Transition Practice Implementation

Using the list of practices implemented by the respondents, three clusters were created using the SPSS cluster analysis procedure. Three clusters were chosen for the algorithm because the four cluster analysis resulted in a small number of respondents in cluster 4. Three clusters provided a balanced number of respondents in each cluster. The
three clusters were given labels based on the significant differences between each of the groupings. Based on the 10 practices chosen by the respondents they were categorized in 1 of the 3 categories. These clusters were identified in Figure 4.1

Cluster 1: Extenders
Cluster 2: Collaborators
Cluster 3: Low-Implementers

In Cluster 1 there were 22 respondents. In Cluster 2 there were 25 respondents. In Cluster 3 there were 44 respondents. There were a total of 91 cases and 8 were missing from the cluster analysis. Three clusters were chosen because of the distribution numbers in each of the clusters. A Cluster 4 analysis was run and the fourth cluster had only four members. Each of the three clusters was identified using the following labels:

Cluster 1 consists of respondents labeled Extenders because the most significant difference between Cluster 1 and Cluster 2 is that they differ in their preference for summer school and extended class periods. Although unrelated to extending the school
year or extending class periods, Cluster 1 respondents also showed a high level of implementation for teaching school-wide expectations (PBIS).

Cluster 2 is labeled as the Collaborators. The label for Cluster 2 appropriately identifies this group because of their focus on small learning communities. The Collaborators had a 44% difference in the average implementation for SLC. Small learning communities are designed to bring people together in a community-focused environment along with interdisciplinary teams of teachers. In addition, Cluster 2 principals are more likely to have an advisory period for students and teachers. Cluster 3 consists of respondents labeled Low Implementers because they are less likely to have transition-focused practices in place to support ninth grade transition. Cluster 3 did not include any principals who were implementing small learning communities (SLC).

The cluster analysis revealed some connections with the practices principals are implementing to support ninth grade transition. The findings also reveal that all three clusters had two common practices in place. These practices included teachers implementing strategies of differentiated instruction (DI) and heterogeneous grouping with a common core curriculum (CCC).
Table 4.19

Item Responses: Final Cluster Centers for Practice Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition Practice</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Extenders</th>
<th>Collaborators</th>
<th>Low Implementers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (diff)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n (diff) %</td>
<td>n (diff) %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sm. Learning Communities</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.59 (+.07)</td>
<td>.96 (+.44)</td>
<td>.00 (-.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary Teaming</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.45 (+.02)</td>
<td>.72 (+.25)</td>
<td>.23 (-.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory Groups</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.59 (+.03)</td>
<td>.76 (+.20)</td>
<td>.34 (-.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Core Curriculum</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.82 (+.12)</td>
<td>.68 (-.02)</td>
<td>.59 (+.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block Scheduling</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.82 (+.43)</td>
<td>.20 (+.19)</td>
<td>.16 (-.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiated Instruction</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.73 (-.05)</td>
<td>.88 (+.10)</td>
<td>.73 (-.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Dose of Core Class</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.50 (+.11)</td>
<td>.32 (-.07)</td>
<td>.34 (-.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class for Ninth grade</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.32 (-.03)</td>
<td>.56 (+.31)</td>
<td>.16 (-.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer School Program</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.91 (+.51)</td>
<td>.12 (-.28)</td>
<td>.16 (-.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.82 (+.28)</td>
<td>.48 (-.06)</td>
<td>.32 (-.22)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Extenders and the Collaborators have some strong differences in their responses in regard to the practices they are implementing. Table 4.19 identifies the cluster centers of each group along with the average and percent difference from the average. The Extenders showed a significant difference in block scheduling (+43%), summer school program (+51%) and PBIS (+28%). The Collaborators showed a significant difference in small learning communities (+44%), interdisciplinary teaming (+25%), advisory groups (+20%) and special class for ninth grade (+31%). The Extenders were more likely to
implement practices that fewer respondents implemented or wanted. The Extenders were more likely to choose block scheduling and summer school and those practices were least likely to be implemented by the Collaborators. In fact, of the ten practices, block scheduling and summer school were 2 of the 3 practices being implemented the least.

Table 4.20

*Cluster Variable with Wanted Practices*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition Practice</th>
<th>Extenders</th>
<th>Collaborators</th>
<th>Low Implementers</th>
<th>( x^2 )</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sm. Learning Communities</td>
<td>7 (32%)</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
<td>23 (52%)</td>
<td>7.56</td>
<td>.023*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary Teaming</td>
<td>12 (.55)</td>
<td>7 (.28)</td>
<td>21 (.48)</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory Groups</td>
<td>7 (.32)</td>
<td>4 (.16)</td>
<td>17 (.39)</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Core Curriculum</td>
<td>3 (.14)</td>
<td>3 (.12)</td>
<td>7 (.16)</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block Scheduling</td>
<td>5 (.23)</td>
<td>7 (.28)</td>
<td>13 (.48)</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiated Instruction</td>
<td>6 (.50)</td>
<td>3 (.33)</td>
<td>17 (.83)</td>
<td>5.57</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Dose of Core Class</td>
<td>10 (.45)</td>
<td>14 (.56)</td>
<td>8 (.18)</td>
<td>11.35</td>
<td>.003**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Class for 9th grade</td>
<td>8 (.36)</td>
<td>11 (.44)</td>
<td>24 (.55)</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer School Program</td>
<td>3 (.14)</td>
<td>8 (.32)</td>
<td>8 (.18)</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>5 (.23)</td>
<td>7 (.28)</td>
<td>14 (.32)</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001. N of valid cases is 91.

Table 4.20 shows the cluster variables using the practices wanted by the respondents. There were 52% of the Low Implementers who wanted SLC compared to the Extenders (32%) and the Collaborators (20%). The second significant finding was
the difference in those groups wanting the practice of offering double dose classes (DD). The Extenders had 45% wanting this practice and the Collaborators had 56%. The Low Implementers had 18% wanting the DD practice.

Table 4.21

*Multinomial Logistic Regression Model*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Low Implementers vs. Extenders RRR ( \exp^{(B)} )</th>
<th>Collaborators vs. Extenders RRR ( \exp^{(B)} )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District size</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt;500</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501-999</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000-1500</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;1500</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free and Reduced Lunch</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FARPL &lt;25%</td>
<td>5.32*</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FARPL 25-50%</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FARPL &gt;50%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principal experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11+ years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p<.05

Table 4.21 shows the 3 category types and the variables associated with each that were entered into multivariable models. The 3 categories were; district size, FARPL and principal experience. Estimated relative risk ratio (RRR) relevant to each comparison
between the outcome categories are presented in table 4.21. The significant correlates of cluster categories included: type of school district, size of school and the number of students receiving FARPL.

The number of student receiving FARPL was a significant correlate of principal groups. In the FARPL category, schools with less than 25% of students receiving FARPL were 4.5 times more likely to be Low Implementers rather than the Extender group. Importantly, principal experience and district size were not associated with cluster membership.

Summary

The present study was a quantitative analysis of transition programs being implemented in NYS high schools. This study attempted to fill two gaps in the research literature. First, the study sought to identify the practices that principals are using to mitigate the negative impact associated with eighth to ninth grade transition. Second, the study attempted to identify the practices that principals would implement if they were afforded the necessary resources.

Using organizational practices identified from prior research on ninth grade transition, a survey was developed to collect data from NYS high school principals. To address the first research question, participants were given a list of ten transition practices and were asked to identify the practices they were currently using. For each of the practices, participants were also asked to identify the number of years the practice had been in place and whether they were intended for all students or for at-risk students only. This provided information on what was being implemented as well as the level of implementation for each of the organizational practices. Finally, as an anonymous
survey, participants were asked to identify various school characteristics including, district type, size of school, school configuration, SES and principal longevity.

Answering Research Question 1:

*What program components being currently implemented by NYS high school principals to support ninth grade transition?*

There were ten organizational practices selected for the survey because they are research-based practices that support ninth graders in a school environment that is communal versus bureaucratic in structure. The two practices that were most likely to be implemented by all respondents were differentiated instruction (75.8%), and heterogeneous grouping with common core curriculum (65.7%). The two practices that were least likely to be implemented by the respondents were summer school (31.3%) and a special ninth grade course preparing students for high school (30.3%).

As far as level of implementation, there were two factors considered: impact on student population and number of years in practice. The practice that was most likely to be implemented for all students was PBIS, a school-wide focus on teaching expectations / responsibility and civility (93.5%). The practice that respondents tended to use more for a targeted or at-risk population was SS, a summer school program (29%). The practice that was most often implemented for two years or more was BLKS, block scheduling (93.8%). The special ninth grade class (SCNG) had the fewest implementers and only 66.7% of those respondents have been implementing the practice for more than two years.
In an open-ended response, principals included practices that they were implementing that were not on the list. The two suggestions from principals that were most mentioned included; a mentoring program and a student orientation.

Answering Research Question 2:

Which program components would principals most likely implement to support ninth grade transition if afforded the necessary resources?

In order to identify the transition practices most wanted by principals, it was first necessary to consider what was being implemented. For example, differentiated instruction (DI) was being implemented by 75.8% of the respondents. Of those respondents who were not implementing DI, 68.2% would want to implement the practice if afforded the necessary resources. This means that DI has the greatest number of respondents who as a combined total (90%), either having or wanting to implement the practice.

Although Differentiated Instruction had the highest percentage wanting the practice, it had the fewest respondents (24) who were non-implementers. The special class for ninth grade (SCNG) had the greatest number of non-implementers (69) and the second highest percent of those who would want the practice (59.1%). Therefore, a special class for ninth graders was the most wanted practice by non-implementers.

Summary of Findings

NYS high school principals are implementing a variety of practices to support ninth grade transition. Using a k-means cluster analysis, three groups were identified based on their selection of practices. A multinomial logistic regression model was then used to determine the likelihood of demographic variables having any correlation with
the groupings. This analysis provided a three-cluster framework and a way to identify common characteristics among schools that must address ninth grade transition. The three-cluster profile tool, was categorized using the following labels; Extenders, Connectors or Low Implementers.

The first cluster was labeled the Extenders because the most significant difference between Cluster 1 and Cluster 2 was their preference for summer school and extended class periods. The Extenders showed a significant difference in block scheduling (+41%), summer school program (+51%) and PBIS (+28%). The Collaborators showed a significant difference in small learning communities (+44%), interdisciplinary teaming (+25%), advisory groups (+20%) and special class for ninth grade (+31%). It was also interesting to note that Cluster 3 did not include any principals who were implementing small learning communities (SLC). All three clusters had two common practices in place; differentiated instruction (DI) and heterogeneous grouping with a common core curriculum (CCC).

Lastly, a significant finding in this research was the difference between the perceived problem levels of ninth grade transition depending on the type of school district. Forty-one percent (41%) of school principals from school in other than central districts thought ninth grade transition was a large problem compared to 5.7% of school principals from central districts. 96.5% of the other district type schools described ninth grade transition as a moderate to large problem compared to only 62% of the central district schools who described the transition as moderate to large problem.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Developing appropriate and effective structures to support ninth grade success is essential for increasing graduation rates. New York public schools spend more per student than any other state in America. However, ranked at 40th in the nation, NYS has one of the lowest high school graduation rates of 67 percent. Nonetheless, this issue is not a New York State problem; it is a problem that affects our entire country.

The results of this study indicate that there are a variety of ninth grade transition practices in place across all districts with little state-wide guidance on what is working. Current policies and practices hold districts accountable for graduation rates but there is limited accountability for what they are implementing during the most important year of high school—ninth grade. This chapter discusses the study’s findings to both of the research questions. The two research questions were: what practices are NYS principals using to support ninth grade transition and what would NYS principals implement to support ninth grade transition if afforded the necessary resources? In addition to discussing the findings, the implications for policy makers, professional practice and future research are discussed.

Organizational Practices

There is consistent evidence that the inadequacy of the school environment causes, to some degree, a decline in student functioning and increases the risk for student maladjustment and school disengagement (Gillock & Reyes, 1996; Barber & Olsen,
The research on high school reform has identified specific school practices that promote a culture of school community and bring about improved outcomes for high school students. In a ninth grade transition study, Kerri Kerr (2000) identified 9 organizational practices that promote a communal environment, then surveyed principals in the state of Maryland to identify the practices that were being implemented. Kerr proposed the theory that ninth graders’ developmental needs, as well as the support they need for a successful transition to high school, are best met by a learning environment that fosters a strong sense of community, including the practices put forward by proponents of communal school organization.

For this study, a survey for principals of ninth grade students was created using the nine practices from Kerr’s study and one additional practice, a school-wide focus on expectations. The following practices were included: small learning communities (SLC), interdisciplinary teaming of teachers (IDT), homeroom or advisory period (ADVP), Heterogeneous grouping with common core curriculum (CCC), Block schedule (BLKS) differentiated instruction (DI), double dose of core class (DD), a special class for ninth graders (SCNG), summer school (SS), a school-wide focus on expectations/Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS). All ten practices were selected for the survey because they are research-based practices that support ninth graders in a school environment that is communal versus bureaucratic in structure.

Research Question One

Practices being implemented in NYS to Support Transition

The two practices that were most likely to be implemented by all respondents were differentiated instruction (75.8%), and heterogeneous grouping with common core
curriculum (65.7%). The two practices that were least likely to be implemented by the respondents were summer school (31.3%) and a special ninth grade course preparing students for high school (30.3%).

Table 5.1 shows a comparison with a similar study done by Kerri Kerr in 2002. Although Kerr’s study was done in Maryland and this study was done in New York, the practices are similar with only slight differences in practice language. For example, common core curriculum (CCC), for this survey was written as \textit{one or fewer core courses tracked by ability}. When comparing the two studies, the greatest difference was found in the implementation of common core curriculum (CCC). The Maryland study identified 18.1% of respondents implementing the practice and this NY study showed 65.7% of respondents implementing the practice. One reason for this discrepancy could be the length of time between studies or it could possibly be due to the state-level standards in New York versus those in Maryland.

The practice identified as having the greatest level of implementation in both studies was called differentiated instruction (DI) for this study and was labeled \textit{student centered instructional practices} in the Maryland study. Both studies had over 75% of their respondents implementing this practice in their schools. Because there subjectivity in the name of the practice, an inference could be made that the subjectivity caused more principals to select DI as an implementing practice. Differentiated instruction is a philosophy of teaching asserting that students learn best when their teachers effectively address differences in students’ readiness levels, interests and learning styles—it is research based and inarguably good for students. It is possible that principals chose this practice because they have an expectation, as a building leader that student needs are
being met in their school. Principals expect that their teachers are meeting the individual needs of their students in classrooms.

Prior Study Comparison

Table 5.1

Comparison of state studies for practice implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DI/ Student Centered Practices</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>-3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block Schedules/ Extended periods</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>-18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Class for Ninth graders</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>-15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Dose Core Courses</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeroom or Advisory Group</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>+16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary Teaming</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>+13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer School</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>+5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Learning Communities</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>+15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Core Curriculum</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td>+47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-Wide Expectations/ PBIS</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Other recommended practices

Although there were ten options to choose from, principals were also asked to identify practices that they were implementing that were not included in the list. The two
practices that had the greatest number of recommendations were 1) a mentoring program and 2) an orientation program. An orientation and mentoring program were identified by almost 20% of principals who provided suggested practices. It is not a surprise that these two practices were mentioned by many of the respondents. Both of these practices are mentioned throughout the literature for supporting transitioning students. In *Breaking Ranks* (1996), The National Association of Secondary School Principals urges schools to develop strategies to ensure that each student is known well at school and that all students are closely monitored. Mentoring provides support by developing a one on one relationship with either a peer or an adult. Mentoring programs vary in structure but most often they emphasize academic achievement. Orientation programs are also what most high schools provide for their incoming students and sometimes their parents. These two options could be added to a survey list for future studies on this topic.

*Research Question Two*

*Practices Wanted by Principals of NYS to Support Transition*

In order to identify the most desirable practice for principals in NYS it was also necessary to consider what was being implemented. For example, differentiated instruction (DI) was implemented by 75.8% of the respondents. Of those respondents who were not implementing DI, 68.2% would want to implement the practice if afforded the necessary resources. This means that 90% of the respondents either had DI in place or wanted to implement the practice.

These results are not surprising considering there has been a great amount of attention on DI, through the work of Carol Tomlinson, as mentioned in chapter two. With increased accountability from No Child Left Behind (NCLB), there has been
additional pressure placed on all schools for increased student achievement. Schools are held accountable with high stake tests and graduation rates. As a result, there has been an emphasis placed on meeting the needs of all students through practices like Differentiated Instruction.

A special class for ninth grade students (SCNG) was being implemented by 30.3% of the principals who responded. Of those respondents who were not implementing SCNG, 59.1% would want to implement the practice if afforded the necessary resources. This means that 72% of respondents either had SCNG in place or wanted to implement the practice. SCNG was the only practice that had more respondents wanting it, than those who were implementing the practice.

**District-Type Comparisons**

There is a significant difference between types of school districts and the level of attention that is given to ninth grade transition. According to the data, 59.1% of the non-central school principals responded that their district gave more attention to ninth grade transition than other district initiatives, compared to 39.1% of the central school principals. Most likely this is because the non-central schools are located in city school districts with more schools and larger student populations. City schools have diverse student populations with increased numbers of second language learners, students with special needs and have students who have higher mobility rates.

Likewise, there is also a significant difference between the perceived problem levels of ninth grade transition depending on the type of school district. Survey results indicated that 41% of the non-central school principals thought ninth grade transition was a large problem compared to 5.7% of the central school principals.
School Configuration Implications

A study conducted by Alspaugh (1998), focused on the achievement loss associated with school to school transitions from elementary school to middle school and to high school. Students transitioning from middle school to high school are more likely to drop out than those students who attend a K-8 school (Alspaugh, 1998; Mizelle, 1999). Using 3 groups of 16 school districts in this ex post facto study, the study found a statistically significant achievement loss with the transition from elementary school to middle school at the sixth grade level as compared to a K-8 program. Both K-8 and middle school students experienced achievement loss in the transition to ninth grade, however the middle school students experienced a greater achievement loss than the K-8 students did. The high school dropout rates were also higher for middle school students than for the K-8 students.

A similar study done by Paglin & Fager study found that each time students transitioned from schools, their feelings of anonymity increased (1997). These researchers found that sixth-grade students in both elementary and K-12 schools outperformed sixth-grade students in middle schools and junior high schools. The significant factor associated with the decrease in performance was the number of transitions the students experienced.

Contrary to evidence in the literature, the majority of eighth-graders in NYS do not attend schools that are in a K-8 configuration. For this study, the schools with the greatest response rate (83.9%) were those receiving students from grades 5-8, 6-8 and 7-8. This indicates that most of the incoming ninth graders were from some type of middle school and had at least one prior transition. The survey identified only 2% of the
principals as having K-8 feeder schools in their districts. It is interesting to note that, although the K-8 school configuration has shown evidence of higher student achievement from research over ten years ago, the majority of NYS districts have a middle school configuration. This is an example of schools having structures in place that are not necessarily in the best interest of students and their academic achievement. This could lead one to believe that there are decisions made by educational leaders are not necessarily driven by what is best-practice, but by what is more financially feasible.

**Summary and Implication of Findings**

School configuration is one example indicating that educational leaders tend to make decisions based on existing structures or budgetary constraints. It appears that practices requiring a significant change to the organizational structure of the school, as well as the use of resources or roles and responsibilities of the school community, are less prevalent. For example, this study revealed that 50% or more principals were implementing Differentiated Instruction or Common Core Curriculum. Both of these practices require training and curriculum writing, but no significant changes in staffing or school structures. The transition practices requiring significant structural changes are Small Learning Communities, Interdisciplinary teaming and Block Scheduling. These practices were implemented by 30-40% of principals. Accordingly, the most commonly used practices represent those requiring only a superficial change to high school organization.

Additionally, as principals reflected on the practices they implement in their schools, it is interesting that only one individual mentioned the idea of using data to make important decisions. No one mentioned making decisions based on research or best
practice. They may be implementing research-based practices, but it wasn’t reflected in their responses. It appears that many practices are being implemented without a strong method of checks and balances. One might infer that decisions around interventions, programs and practices are subject to what everyone else is doing, not necessarily by what has been proven to increase achievement. Too often in education, decisions are made without any clear focus how student outcomes will be assessed or programs will be evaluated. This continues to be a topic of discussion for educational leaders and researchers. Doug Reeves for example, defines high impact professional learning as that which balances student results with a rigorous observation of adult practices not merely a measurement of student results (2010).

Cluster Analysis Findings

Using the various implemented practices from the list of ten, three clusters were created with the SPSS cluster analysis procedure. The three clusters; Extenders, Collaborators, and Low-Implementers were given labels based on the significant differences between each of the groupings. The Extenders were more likely to implement the following practices; PBIS, Block Scheduling, Double Dose of Core Courses, and Summer School. The Collaborators were more likely to implement Interdisciplinary Teaming and a Special Class for Ninth Graders. Both of these clusters were also more likely to implement Advisory Periods and Small Learning Communities. The Low-Implementers were less likely to implement any of the above practices. All three clusters were likely to implement Common Core Curriculum and Differentiated Instruction. Table 5.2 shows the cluster comparison and differentiates between the social/emotional and instructionally focused practices.
Academic and social challenges of transition

There is a strong consensus that the concerns of adolescents entering ninth grade need to be met by establishing an effective multi-level program that addresses academic, procedural and social challenges (Akos, 2004; Ascher, 2006; MacIver & Epstein, 2002; Hertzog and Morgan, 1997; Mizelle, 1999). For many students, negotiating the transition to high school is challenging, particularly when it comes to academics. According to Akos (2004), students identified their top two fears associated with entering ninth grade and both were related to academics.

When it comes to school and education, the academic outcomes of adolescents are highly related to their social outcomes (Juvonen and Wentsel 1996). Transitioning ninth graders may experience disruptions in friendships as they enter a new building. These school-related changes may lead to significant changes in social support. Peers may also play a significant role in students’ attitudes, including their mindset towards school (Berndt, 1982, Kelly & Hansen, 1987).

Figure 5.1 shows the cluster analysis based on the social/emotional versus the instructional focus of the practice. Three cluster groups were identified with the practices they were most likely to implement and then categorized whether they were implementing practices that were more academic, social emotional or a combination of both. The three cluster groups are referred to as: Extenders, Collaborators and Low Implementers.

Figure 5.1 indicates that the Extenders tended to implement more instructionally focused practices. The Collaborators provided practices that included a balance of both instruction and social/emotional benefits. The Low-Implementers had the fewest
practices and they were Common Core Curriculum and Differentiated Instruction. All three cluster groups implemented both of these instructionally focused practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Social/ Emotional</th>
<th>Academic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School-Wide Expectations/ PBIS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block Scheduling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Core Curriculum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory Groups/ Homeroom</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiated Instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary Teaming</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Learning Communities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Class for Ninth Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Dose of Core Subject</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.1. Cluster analysis based on social/emotional and instructional focus. Shaded areas = clusters with 50% or greater respondents implementing the practice.

Since the survey was anonymous, we do not know which schools were identified as Extenders, Collaborators or Low-Implementers. The analysis from this study has revealed, for example, that Low-Implementers tended to be schools that have fewer than 25% of their students receiving free or reduced priced lunch (FARPL). However,
knowing the identity of the schools would allow for further investigation into the correlation between the student achievement levels and the cluster groups. It may also be interesting to find out if there is a connection between cluster groups and their geographic locations. Schools from the same region may share a common Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). Principals who belong to a BOCES would have opportunities to network with other principals from their region and this may be a factor in deciding which practices to implement.

Limitations

This study has a few potential limitations. First of all, it is clear from the various open-ended responses that the best practice terminology used in the survey may have been unclear. Some of the recommendations that principals made for other practices, were already listed as one of the ten practices. For example, a class to help ninth grade students was offered as an additional practice. This was already listed as Special Class for Ninth grade (SCNG). Often times in education there are terms that are not uniformly defined. The literature for many of these practices does not offer precise definitions and some practices may be loosely interpreted or provided with some variation.

Secondly, it was difficult to identify the level of implementation for each of the practices. An attempt was made by asking the respondents to identifying the number of years the practice was in place and the number of students being impacted by the practice. In addition to slightly different interpretations of each practice the level of implementation is another important factor when determining the level of impact for supporting student achievement. This all depends on the expectations of school administration and the level of implementation by the classroom teacher.
Lastly, the district type questions in the survey did not align with the NYS district categories. Therefore, there are some schools that are classified as city school districts but may not be considered an urban school district. This may have caused some confusion for the participants. To make sure there was an accurate representation of the data, the results were listed as central school districts and all other school districts. Contrary to other studies, the majority of responses (78.3%) came from central school districts. Most of the research in the area of transition has been focused on studies in large urban high schools.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

Accountability measures that focus on ninth grade. The ninth grade retention rate is a significant problem in the United States. Research indicates that student who are on-track at the end of their freshman year of high school are more than three and one-half times more likely to graduate in four years than those students who are off-track (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Although states with required benchmarks or on-time indicators for ninth graders have shown an increase in student achievement (Neild, 2009), there is no such accountability system required for districts in New York State. In fact, this study identified less than 1% of principals who even mentioned tracking student performance during ninth grade.

Standard promotion practices. Students in New York State must earn 22 credits within four years to graduate from high school. However, school districts set their own standards for promotion to the next grade, and these requirements vary from one district to another. It is difficult to accurately analyze ninth grade promotion rates across districts or states, since many districts have different promotion criteria and many do not collect,
track, or report these data. As a result, comprehensive national data on promotion criteria are not available for individual states or districts.

**Understanding of best practices for transition.** Although states and districts are increasing efforts to support ninth grade achievement, there is a lack of evidence about which reforms worked or do not work, and for whom and under what circumstances (Rouse & Kemple, 2009). This information would give practitioners a better understanding and means for making informed programmatic decisions.

Focus on concerns of city districts. Lastly, it is clear from the data in this study, that city school principals have a significantly higher concern about issues related to ninth grade transition than central school districts. This discrepancy should be an indicator that more support is needed by the state to address these areas of concern by providing city school leaders with guidance in the area of ninth grade transition. Conferences and trainings in this area would support district leaders in developing a common understanding of best practice and opportunity for implementation in this area.

In summary, the following is a list of recommendations that will provide educational leaders with the supports necessary to address the issues of ninth grade transition:

1. Accountability measures that focus on ninth grade
2. Standard promotion practices for what constitutes a ninth grader
3. Common definitions and understanding of best practices for transition
4. Focus on city districts who have more pronounced transition concerns and needs
**Recommendations for School Districts and Principals**

This study revealed that there is little connection between what schools have in place to support transition and the type of school or principal experience. This finding would suggest that practices are selected arbitrarily versus part of a holistic programmatic planning process. There is also little evidence that the efficacies of these practices are being assessed based on student engagement and achievement. According to the study, several schools used a packaged program like *Ignition* to support ninth grade transition. Although these programs help to organize schools and set up structures, it may be an unnecessary expense depending on what the schools already have in place. It is important for a school to first determine what they have in place to support incoming students and what their specific needs are for transitioning students into high school. A key factor for developing a comprehensive transition program is that the practices are chosen based on the distinctive qualities of the school and the students who attend.

**Ninth Grade Transition Team**

Every school is different and there are numerous considerations regarding what practices best support the individuals who need support—the students. For example, a large school may benefit more from a small learning community (SLC) structure versus a smaller school, where this practice may not be necessary. In order to assess and develop a transition plan, districts benefit by establishing a ninth grade transition team. Schools begin by including members from all stakeholder groups from feeder school(s) and the receiving secondary school. According to MacIver, a transition program needs to bring middle school and high school staff together to learn about one another’s curriculum and expectations (1990). The Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE)
advise that a successful, comprehensive transition program includes a written plan that engages a large group of stakeholders including parents, businesses, nonprofit organizations, unions, educators, politicians, and the community at large (2003). The National Middle School Association (NMSA) identifies collaboration with eighth and ninth grade building personnel as an essential component to developing an effective transition program (2006). Figure 5.2 shows a model for establishing a team and transition plan that is specific to the school and needs of the students who attend.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 5.2. Developing a Plan for Ninth Grade Transition.**

The model in Figure 5.2 has four components: recruiting transition members, assessing current practices, establishing practices using a timeline, and developing an ongoing system of evaluation. The transition plan model was used by this practitioner as a framework for developing a transition team and school-wide transition plan. Table 5.2
depicts the actual members of a team that used research based principles to develop a comprehensive transition plan.

Recruiting

This transition team consisted of two facilitators; the middle school and high school principals. The other members were invited to serve on the team by both facilitators and were targeted for two reasons. First, they were all highly invested and motivated staff members. Second, these individuals had the most knowledge about what practices were in place to support all students entering ninth grade. Parents served as key contributors by providing important feedback that was missing from prior transition planning sessions.

Table 5.2

Sample Membership of a Ninth Grade Transition Team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition Team Members</th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principals (facilitators)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselors</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social workers</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education teachers</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special area teachers</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Secondary Education</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Special Education</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Total members = 30. Depicts a 9-12 high school, enrollment =1452

Assessing transition needs. During the first year the team gathered information regarding what was in place to support students and inform parents. Heterogeneous subcommittees were developed with multiple stakeholders in each group. These lists included any activity or practice that the stakeholders could find that was occurring to
support incoming ninth graders. The list ranged from instructional practices, to letters home, presentations, and orientation. The findings were then organized into one of the following categories:

1. Orientation
2. Visitations
3. Academic Planning Night
4. Counseling Presentations
5. Curriculum Connections
6. Targeted/At Risk Practices

Planning

The assessment process revealed that the district did not have a transition plan in place – there was no transition blueprint for what was happening, when it was happening, or who was responsible for making it happen. As a response, subcommittees were created for each of the six categories. Each of the sub-committees was represented by stakeholders from both the high school and the middle school.

Evaluating

Over a three year period, the team had the role of determining what was in place; identified gaps and offered recommendations for various transition practices. The team also developed tools for evaluating the efficacy of the practices and recommendations for ongoing improvement. Each subcommittee was in charge of evaluating the event or events within their group.

Time is a valuable resource for everyone. During this process of creating a district-wide transition team, it was difficult to create a common meeting time. In order
to improve communication between group members and work more efficiently during large group sessions, a Wiki was developed for the team. A Wiki is a website that allows multiple members to edit, delete or add to the site. This Wiki served as an on-line manual to bring all of the transition pieces together. Stakeholders from all subcommittee groups used the site to discuss and adjust program practices. Along with a timeline, the site included: letters to parents, power points, surveys, timelines, guidelines and presentation notes. The Wiki enabled the team to reduce meeting times allowing participants the necessary time to serve on additional committees.

*Impact of a Ninth Grade Transition Team*

Transition practices should not be random, individual acts, but part of a well-planned series of activities that have an impact on student engagement and achievement. Developing a transition team with multiple stakeholder groups allows schools to create comprehensive programs that foster communication and collaboration between schools. Table 5.3 shows the changes that took place as a result of the secondary transition team.
### Table 5.3

**Sample Changes Due to Transition Team Recommendations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Transition Team</th>
<th>Implemented with recommendations by Transition Team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientation format was one day with parents and students together. The day was led by staff members.</td>
<td>Orientation day begins with parents and students together. The parents and students are then separated. Incoming ninth graders are let by student leaders in small groups. Parents choose breakout sessions based on their interests and level of experience as a high school parent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th Grade visitation to HS occurred for those students who did not attend the Washington DC trip. This meant that only some students visited the high school during the school year.</td>
<td>An additional day was scheduled for all students to visit the high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled events were done year after year with few changes. Decisions were often made in isolation by the individuals in charge of the event.</td>
<td>Events are evaluated and discussed by stakeholders using an on-line event manual. Ongoing improvements are made based on data, including student and parent input.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-7 and 8-9 transition practices are separate</td>
<td>6-7 and 8-9 share transition practices Structure and event ideas are more aligned than ever before for each district-wide transition. The best ideas from each were shared and are being implemented. This also builds more cohesion for students moving from building to building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Planning Night was only for parents.</td>
<td>Parents and students are encouraged to come to Academic Planning Night.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although it is the responsibility of the building principal to establish structures that support ninth grade transition, a transition team can provide valuable information for these important decisions. The Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) (2003) advises that successful transition and comprehensive programs include a written plan that engages a large group of stakeholders. A transition team should consist of all
stakeholders from middle school and high school, assess the current transition practices, develop a plan for incoming students and establish an ongoing evaluation process for assessing the program. Schools vary in type and size and therefore it is essential that practices are chosen based on the distinctive qualities of the school and the students who are enrolled.

Recommendations for Researchers

This study has provided information about what principals are doing to support ninth grade transition and what they would like to implement but has left many questions to be answered. The findings of this study suggest the following recommendations for further study:

1. What are the factors that drive the decisions principals make and the practices they implement to support ninth grade transition?

2. What are the significant barriers for implementing research-based practices for supporting ninth grade students?

3. What practices do principals implement to monitor students, especially those who are off-track for graduation?

4. How do principals monitor the effectiveness of their transition practices?

5. Do principals adjust their practices on a yearly basis based on the needs of the incoming ninth graders?

Lastly, researchers can use the cluster profile, (Extenders, Collaborators or Low-Implementers) from this study as a tool for identifying what principals are doing and if there is any significant difference in student achievement between the three clusters. For example, data from Algebra Regents Examination taken by the majority of ninth graders
can be used as a tool to assess academic achievement. An analysis can also be done by comparing a cohort’s gains or losses from their 8th grade to 9th grade assessment scores. We can determine if the Extenders, Collaborators or Low-Implementers have a greater connection to student achievement or if there is no significant correlation between the cluster profile and student achievement.

Conclusion

This state-wide study sought to gather information regarding characteristics of schools, their districts and the likelihood that schools with similar characteristics would choose similar organizational practices. However, the findings indicate that NYS high school principals are using a diverse set of practices with little correlation between school characteristics and practices being implemented. There is also little evidence that the efficacy of these practices is being assessed based on student achievement. Educational practitioners make important decisions, allocating funds and services, establishing structures and practices that directly impact student achievement. However, there seems to be limited state-wide guidance or resources in place to support principals with these important decisions.

Educational leaders and researchers must move forward by taking a critical look at what is being implemented to support ninth grade achievement, what works, and what practices need to be adjusted or abandoned. We can no longer initiate change without assessing the efficacy of structures and past practice.
References


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National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005


Auburn House.


Appendix A

Survey

1. Consent to Participate in On-Line Survey

Title: Ninth Grade Transition

Name of Researcher: Dana Boschnack email address: dboschnack@hilton.k12.ny.us
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Guillermo Montes email address: gmontes@sjfc.edu

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study is to identify what practices NYS high school principals are using to support ninth grade transition.

Approval of Study: This study has been reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Place of Study: New York State

Length of Participation: September 30th-October 8, 2010

Potential Risks: None

Potential Benefits: The results of this study may provide educators and policy makers with a better understanding of what practices are currently being implemented to support ninth grade transition and those practices that principals would like to implement given the necessary resources.

Method of Protecting Confidentiality/Privacy: Data will be stored in a secure, locked file box. Any report of this research that is made available to the public will not include any other individual information by which you could be identified. All responses will be anonymous.

Your Rights: As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or course treatment, if any that might be advantageous to you.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact the Office of Academic Affairs at (585) 385-8034, or the Wellness Center at 585 385-8280 for appropriate referrals.

By beginning this survey you acknowledge that you have read the information and agree to participate in this research, with the knowledge that you are free to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty. Click on the link to continue:

1. Click YES if you consent to participate in this study
   - Yes
   - No
2. Organizational Practices

There has been an increased focus in the area of ninth grade achievement and the impact on graduation rates. The following survey will collect information from high school principals in New York State about the practices currently being used to support ninth grade transition.

This survey will take less than 5 minutes and your answers will remain confidential. Thank you for your participation.

1. Please check the organizational practices that you are currently implementing in your school. If you check “yes” then identify the number of years this practice has been in place and how many 9th grade students are affected by the practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Yes or No</th>
<th>Number of years in place</th>
<th>How many 9th graders are affected by this practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small learning communities for 9th graders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary teaming of teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeroom or advisory groups for students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterogeneous grouping/ students share a common core curriculum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended class periods/block or modified block schedule</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The majority of core teachers are using strategies of differentiated instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra subject period, or double dose of a core class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A special class for ninth graders to help learn the skills to be successful in high school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A summer school program for ninth graders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A school-wide focus on teaching expectations/ responsibility and civility (e.g. PBIS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Please describe any other practices that you have in place to support 9th graders that you would recommend to other high school principals.

3. Please check the organizational practices that you would like to put in place if you had the necessary resources.

- Small learning communities for 9th graders
- Interdisciplinary teaching of teachers
- Homeroom or advisory groups for students
- Heterogeneous grouping/ students share a common core curriculum
- Extended class periods/block or modified block schedule
- The majority of core teachers are using strategies of differentiated instruction
- Extra subject period, or double dose of a core class
- A special class for ninth graders to help learn the skills to be successful in high school
- A summer school program for ninth graders
- A school-wide focus on teaching expectations/ responsibility and civility (ie PBIS)
- Other (please specify)

4. In your school, how much of a problem is 9th grade transition?

- Not a problem
- Moderate problem
- Large problem
5. Compared with other initiatives, how much attention is given to 9th grade transition?

- Less
- About the same
- More
3. Feeder School(s)

The next two questions will ask you about the schools that are sending students to your school.

1. How many schools do you have feeding into your school?
   - [ ] one school
   - [ ] two schools
   - [ ] three schools
   - [ ] four or more schools

2. Please indicate the configuration of your feeder school(s).
   - [ ] K-5
   - [ ] 5-8
   - [ ] 6-8
   - [ ] 7-8
   - [ ] other
4. Demographics

1. Identify the size/type that best describes your district
   - small urban
   - medium urban
   - large urban
   - small central
   - medium central
   - large central

2. What grades are in your school?
   - 9th grade only
   - 9-10
   - 9-11
   - 9-12

3. Size of your school
   - <500 Students
   - 501-999 Students
   - 1000-1500 Students
   - >1500 Students

4. Percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch in your school
   - <25%
   - 25-50%
   - 50-75%
   - >75%

5. Years of experience as a principal:
   - 1-5 years
   - 6-10 years
   - 11-15 years
   - 16-20 years
   - over 20 years
6. As a principal of ninth grade, what do you think is needed to improve 9th grade transition?
Appendix B

Definitions of Terms

Academic Achievement - defined as grade and school completion, and student’s proficiency based on standardized test scores (Woodland, 2008).

Academic Transition - “a process during which institutional and social factors influence which students’ educational careers are positively or negatively affected by this movement between organizations” (Schiller, 1999).

At Risk Students - Students are placed “at risk” when they experience a significant mismatch between their needs and the ability of the school to accommodate them in a manner that supports their maximum social, emotional, and intellectual growth and development (Hixson, 1993).

Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) - a reliable definition for comparing across the states the percentage of students who graduate on time.

Best Practices - a research-based set of practices that have been proven effective.

Early School Leavers - at-risk youth who are “unlikely to graduate on schedule with the skills and self-confidence necessary to have meaningful options in work, culture, civic affairs, and relationships” (Ferguson et al., 2006).

Ninth Grade Transition Program - A program offered in the ninth grade to assist students moving from middle school to high school.

Ninth Grade Bulge - Students who are held back in ninth grade causing an increase in student enrollment for this grade.
No Child Left Behind (NCLB) - Act of 2001 that placed a new focus on student achievement in schools. Graduation rates and measures of student proficiency are factored into state-defined standards for “adequate yearly progress.”

Off-Track - Not having earned sufficient course credits in the normally allotted time (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).

On-Track - Indicator that highlights the importance of the ninth grade: a student is on-track if he or she earns at least five full-year course credits and fails no more than one core course during the first year of high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).

Transition - Refers to a period of moving from one phase to another.