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Does Choice in School Selection Contribute to Ninth Grade Academic Achievement?

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Abstract
Ninth grade achievement is pivotal for the success of a student to graduate and avoid dropping out of school. Students are transitioned as ninth graders into schools not of their choosing or assigned to neighborhood schools. While there is extensive research on ninth grade achievement, dropout risk factors and student motivation, there is a gap in the literature in how school selection plays a role in ninth grade academic achievement. The purpose of this study was to explore how choice, in the selection of schools, contributed to ninth grade academic achievement. This study investigated the relationship of choice and ninth grade success for students who chose their high school in an urban district in the Northeast region of the United States. Students' grade point average, attendance and credits earned were compiled in an experimental study. The ANOVA analysis compared data of those students who received their first choice school assignment against those students who received their third choice school assignment and fifth through eight choice assignment. A major finding was that ninth graders who were placed in their first choice school had better attendance than other students in the other choice groups. After a student's choice has been made there is a need to know how student outcomes are positively impacted by this choice. A school of choice process should be viewed as a comprehensive framework process which begins at the time of choice and concludes at the end of a student's first year in the new placement.

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Does Choice in School Selection Contribute to Ninth Grade Academic Achievement?

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Dedication

The path to earning a doctorate degree requires support and unconditional love from your family. This work is dedicated to my family. The encouragement and love I received gave me the strength to complete this journey. To my children, Phillip Michael and Jacqueline Enid, who give me the strength to endure the unexpected. To my loving and patient husband, Felipe, who never complained about the lonely times as I spent endless hours in school. To my father and mother, Victor and Mary, who taught me the value of education and came to rescue my family when I most needed them. To my brother, Victor, who encouraged me when I wanted to quit. To my dear sister Edna, who from heaven helped watch over my family as I worried about the infinite hours this degree took. To my brother, Michael, who was a reminder that courage is necessary in any task we endure. To my dear Celiana and Lucy, who were my phone buddies when I most needed them. To my wonderful nieces and nephews who entertained me with their smiles and support. Thank you to all, my wonderful family, for allowing me to reach my dream, earning a doctorate degree.

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never doubted my ability to complete the program. Thanks to Dr. Cheryl McGruder Holloway for your gentle ways and encouraging words along the journey.

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Biographical Sketch

Vicma I. Colon Ramos is currently Executive Director of School Operations and Placement in an urban school district in New York. Mrs. Ramos began her college career at the University of Puerto Rico in 1978. She later transferred to Florida State University, where she graduated Magna Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Arts in Multilingual Education in 1981. Vicma obtained her Masters of Arts degree from the State University of New York at Brockport in 1992. She continued her studies in educational administration at SUNY Brockport, receiving her administration certificate in 1995. In May 2011, Vicma began her doctoral studies in the Ed.D Program in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College. Mrs. Ramos completed her research on the contribution choice can have to ninth grade academic achievement under the direction of Dr. Marie Cianca and received her Ed.D degree in May 2014.

Abstract

Ninth grade achievement is pivotal for the success of a student to graduate and avoid dropping out of school. Students are transitioned as ninth graders into schools not of their choosing or assigned to neighborhood schools. While there is extensive research on ninth grade achievement, dropout risk factors and student motivation, there is a gap in the literature in how school selection plays a role in ninth grade academic achievement. The purpose of this study was to explore how choice, in the selection of schools, contributed to ninth grade academic achievement. This study investigated the relationship of choice and ninth grade success for students who chose their high school in an urban district in the Northeast region of the United States. Students' grade point average, attendance and credits earned were compiled in an experimental study. The ANOVA analysis compared data of those students who received their first choice school assignment against those students who received their third choice school assignment and fifth through eight choice assignment. A major finding was that ninth graders who were placed in their first choice school had better attendance than other students in the other choice groups. After a student's choice has been made there is a need to know how student outcomes are positively impacted by this choice. A school of choice process should be viewed as a comprehensive framework process which begins at the time of choice and concludes at the end of a student's first year in the new placement.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2005), 83% of Americans believe there is an urgent need to improve the nation's high schools. Only two-thirds of American teenagers, and only half of all African Americans, Latino and Native American teens, graduate with a regular diploma four years after they enter high school (Hebert, 2005). Research has demonstrated that ninth grade is a pivotal year for secondary school success or failure (Reinhard, 1997).

Nationally, 45% of ninth-graders fail one or more subjects in their first year of high school (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). In addition, the nationwide failure rate of ninth-graders has tripled in the last 30 years (Jonsson, 2004). Ninth grade failure can be attributed to student disengagement, greater graduation requirements, lack of student empowerment or school connections. Wagner (1989) believes that students who fail their classes are likely to: (a) begin questioning their ability to make graduation requirements, (b) lose interest in school, and (c) consequently drop out of high school. Zvoch (2006) referred to three common reasons for students to drop out of school: (a) not liking school, (b) not getting along with teachers and others, and (c) failing.

The price for dropping out of high school is steep. In addition to lower lifetime earnings than high school and college graduates, those who drop out of high school are more likely to be unemployed, receive public assistance, become incarcerated, or become single parents (Bridgeland, 2010). The ramifications of dropping out of school for subsequent employment opportunities and earning potential underscore the importance of

this issue. Youth who fail to complete high school have twice the unemployment rate of graduates in addition to diminished opportunities for post-secondary school or confirmed training (Noguera, 2008).

Students enter high school with numerous challenges that impact their ability to be academically successful during high school and ultimately graduate in four years (Rumberger, 2008). Lack of school connection impacts student performance. These challenges become apparent when students begin to fail courses during the ninth grade year; when they become frustrated with failure and experience a loss of motivation; and when they find themselves in schools that do not match their interests or personal goals (Zvoch, 2006).

Evidence of the disengagement of young adolescents in schools has intensified as educational policy changes have made schools accountable for graduation rates (Noguera, 2007). Greater accountability has led schools to increase graduation requirements, which also means that schools need to support students as requirements increase. Students without support may drop out of school. Rumberger (2008) attributes individual characteristics as risk factors contributing to high school dropout rates. For example, students may have individual characteristics such as interest, motivation or connections to school that play a role in their academic success. Students who are not connected do not perform to their greatest potential. In addition, studies over the last thirty years have shown that student motivation and empowerment can be significant indicators of student success (Brooks & Young, 2001).

Students who are empowered and have choice in their learning perform better than peers who do not have choice (Deci, 2008). While many factors foster lasting issues

for students who are unable to progress into colleges or careers, they pose a great dilemma for educators who are highly concerned with low graduation rates that are evident in many American public school settings (Noguera, 2007).

Factors Impacting High School Success

Research shows that there is a correlation between ninth grade student achievement and student performance throughout the remaining high school years. When students cannot meet the required academic achievement in a targeted time of four years, they are viewed as failures by new federal standards (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). Not graduating in four years results in high levels of student frustration, dropping out of high school or failure to complete high school within four years. Brown and Rodriguez (2009) have studied factors that are predictive of high school failure and dropping out of school. Some of these factors are: academic failure, needed employment, family care, law violations, attendance and lack of engagement or interest. Students who are able to maintain connections in schools have a better chance of overcoming factors that can influence their decision of dropping out of school. Additionally, research has pointed to the role choice can play in heightening students' interest and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2009).

Ninth Grade Performance

Ninth grade is a pivotal year for high school students (Jonsson, 2004). Research indicates that student performance during ninth grade is predictive of success rates throughout the remaining high school years (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). Stearns and Glennie (2006) examined factors of academic failure, disciplinary reasons, employment needs and family care as reasons for teenagers to leave high school.

Notably, these factors can influence ninth grade achievement. In addition to Stearns and Glennie, Gasper, DeLuca, and Estacion (2011) established mobility and unsupported school transitions as contributing factors for dropping out of school.

Fine (1991) supported previous studies when he established that when students do not feel part of a school community, this further contributes to student distress impacting dropout rates and ninth grade achievement. Most importantly, Christle, Joviette, and Nelson (2007) were able to conclude in their study that dropping out of school was not an impulsive action, but a cumulative process. The importance of understanding the relationship between students' academic success and schools can be essential to understanding this cumulative process. In the same fashion, because ninth grade is an important year for high school achievement, attention must be given to those factors that can contribute to dropping out of high school.

Five years ago, three ninth grade students had a dream to graduate and enter college. They each came from the same urban city high school. They had a similar socio-economic status, each qualifying for free and reduced school meals. They lived with a parent who never attended college. Each said they had a loving family who cared for them. One of the three students, Ashley, a Latina girl, had arrived to the United States three years prior from a Spanish speaking country. She dreamt of being a fashion designer. She did not consider herself intelligent. Ramon, a bi-racial male, had been born and raised in the city. He was considered by his classmates as the clown of the class. He was intelligent and hoped to become an engineer. Lamar, an African American male, was a gentle and quiet student. He struggled to maintain passing grades. He hoped to become a songwriter.

Five years later, Ashley graduated from high school. She entered a reputable four year college to study nursing. She had managed to follow her dream of attending college. Ramon, the smartest of all three students, dropped out of high school after tenth grade. He was not passing any classes, lost interest in school, and though he had the support of many because of his potential, he did not finish high school. Lamar was not able to complete high school in four years. He returned the fifth year to complete his high school requirements. Lamar was not able to finish his fifth year. In February of his fifth year, he was shot and died in the driveway of his cousin's home on a Sunday afternoon. Statistically these three students represent the stories of many high school students. Uncovering influences and district practices that can support high school completion within district processes can benefit those students, who like Ramon, became disengaged.

Lamar, Ramon and Ashley represent the stories of many adolescents in our schools. Ramon is like many other students across the United States who leave school prior to graduation. Why do students leave? What motivates them to stay? Despite millions of federal dollars invested in dropout prevention, there continues to be an increase in the dropout rate (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) report that transitions to high school and increased graduation requirements are reasons students struggle and drop out. Ninth grade continues to be a pivotal and important year for students. It is during the ninth grade year that many students, for the first time, must earn passing grades to earn credit in all subjects. As a result of the increased demands, ninth graders have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, the majority of failing grades and the highest enrollment rate (Brown and Rodriguez, 2009). Though the transition to high school can represent an

important milestone, transitions can also cultivate feelings of loneliness and disconnect (Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2011).

Adolescents spend a large percentage of their day in school. For students who face multiple risk factors, school may represent one of the most protective environments (Doll & Lyon, 1998). Dynarski and Gleason (2002) state that students are less likely to drop out of high school if they experience academic success and/or became connected to adults and peers within the school setting. Brown and Rodriguez (2009) examined the lives of two Latino students in a large urban city as they struggled with the concept of dropping out of school. It was clear to these researchers that their progressive disengagement from school was a process that did not happen in one day. Disengagement began during ninth grade experiences. One of the students, who was extraordinarily kind, insightful and articulate, began his disengagement with courses that did not challenge him. The other student struggled with academics and could not receive the support needed, in a timely manner. Consequently, both students dropped out in the fourth year of high school.

Dropping Out and School Policies

These life-altering decisions to drop out of school are part of a disengagement process. Students who are engaged in school feel connected. Students who are not connected become disengaged and can be viewed as part of a disengagement process. When students disengage and schools fail to connect with the students, schools are shirking their institutional responsibility to help students succeed. The disengagement process can also be linked to the individual student. Drop out literature reports that the disengagement process is associated with risk factors that may contribute to dropping out

of school. Some commonly known risk factors in the body of dropout literature include: race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, language proficiency, family background, academic readiness, school size, school location, student body demographics and student behavior (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). Furthermore, the disengagement of young adolescents has intensified since graduation requirements have increased and made schools more accountable for graduation rates. One of these increased requirements is that students must graduate in four years after entering high school in ninth grade Noguera, 2009).

Being on-track to graduate in four years is critical for student success and school accountability as monitored by federal graduation requirements. Ninth graders are identified as being on-track if they have earned credits in math, English, science and social studies and one elective credit. The research of Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg (2008) substantiates the link between poor ninth grade academic performance and decreased chance of graduating. Neild et al. (2008) found one-third of ninth graders in Philadelphia schools failed to accumulate enough credits for promotion their first high school year and more than 40% of ninth graders in Chicago failed a major subject during the first semester. Neild et al. further noted that understanding the importance of students' academic and social skills resulted in a positive outcome in the students' educational trajectory when the demands of a high school were cushioned by a supportive environment.

It is important for a student who is facing academic failure to be able to connect to school. Hebert (2005) states that only two-thirds of American teenagers, and only half of all African Americans, Latino and Native American teens, graduate with a regular

diploma four years after they enter high school. Rumberger and Rodrigues (2002) attribute individual characteristics, known as risk factors, and problems within institutions as factors contributing to high dropout rates. Zvock (2006) emphasizes the importance of kids connecting to schools, to teachers and becoming engaged with their education. Losing interest in school and consequently dropping out can be a result for students who struggle academically and are disengaged (Wagner, 1989).

Prior to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, the federal government's role in public education was primarily one of monitoring for compliance. The federal government provided funding for children in poverty with the Title I Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. With No Child Left Behind, public schools were faced with federal, state, and local school accountability measures (NCLB, 2002). These policy initiatives called for improved student performance by placing increased demands on public schools and students to perform. NCLB required all states to develop and administer annual tests in reading and math for all students in grades 3-8 and at least once in these subjects in grades 9-12. Schools' testing results needed to demonstrate continual progress toward the goal of having all children proficient in math and reading (Adequate Yearly Progress) and with graduation rates. Schools that did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) or failed to graduate 85% of their students in four years, for two or more consecutive years, were identified for improvement. Schools receiving federal Title I funds were subject to federal sanctions for not making Adequate Yearly Progress for two or more years in a row. Low performing urban schools faced challenges of public scrutiny, requiring immediate substantive change in student achievement, as schools were being sanctioned for failing to meet improvement goals. Mandated accountability, increased testing, as well as school choice options for children in failing schools, added to

the complexities of low performing schools (Houle, 2006). Attention to the achievement gap and inequities in the educational system urgently called for schools to be held more accountable further impacting student achievement (Noguera, 2008). These new accountability factors further contributed to the struggles for public school urban ninth graders.

Urban ninth graders in public schools grapple with the newly imposed academic accountability and school support. In addition to academic struggles, poverty, low socioeconomic status and violence can be common struggles for urban students (Samuel, Sondergeld, Fischer, & Patterson, 2011). Such endemic struggles can confound the imposed academic accountability making it harder for ninth graders to achieve academically (Samuel et al., 2011). Student choice has been aligned to indicators of academic achievement. Perhaps choice of school selection can minimize the struggles for ninth graders.

Schools of Choice

The original schools of choice plans were designed to desegregate schools and create equal opportunities regardless of color, race, or family background (Ravitch, 2010). In 1954, the Supreme Court decision in Oliver L. Brown et al. v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas mandated equalization of resources and access to educational opportunities (Ravitch, 2010). The Brown Case stated that segregating children based solely on their race was a violation to the 14th amendment rights of Black people. The Supreme Court Justices mandated school desegregation. The intended consequence was the provision of equal opportunity in education for all individuals.

States did not immediately comply with the provisions. Children remained segregated Robert, 2010).

Integration came ten years later with The Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Act was landmark legislation that outlawed segregation in U.S. schools and in public places. The bill also included a provision to ban discrimination in public accommodations thereby "giving all Americans" the right to be served in facilities that were open to the public. Public Law 88-352, 1964 formed the basis for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The Civil Rights Act had a direct impact on schools of choice policies, busing plans, equalized student expenditure goals, and career training or magnet programs offered in particular schools in a district. The Act integrated families permitting children of all races to attend resource-rich programs and schools throughout their district. The Act allowed choice for parents and students, thus making it the first time parents could become involved in a public school of choice process (Ravitch, 2010).

School choice plans have evolved over the last five decades since desegregation efforts began. School accountability under NCLB (2001) has influenced school choice policies by requiring other schools to be available to students in underperforming schools. Schools of choice plans may include magnet schools, private and parochial schools, voucher plans and charter schools. Research suggests that the opportunity for school choice supports social connections among participants (Goldring and Phillips, 2007). However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the role choice plays in the academic achievement of a ninth grader who chooses his new school. Wentzel (1997) supports a link between perceived autonomy support and academically based outcomes. Loyd (2005) investigated the extent to which exposure to Choice Theory increased

students' perceived satisfaction in four psychological needs: belonging, power, freedom and fun. Another area of research is the correlation of choice and student achievement linking positive outcomes to increased academic performance and school connections (Deci and Ryan, 2008).

Problem Statement

Ninth grade achievement is pivotal for the success of a student to graduate and avoid dropping out of school. Students are transitioned as ninth graders into schools not of their choosing or assigned to neighborhood schools. While there is extensive research on ninth grade achievement, dropout risk factors and student motivation, there is a gap in the literature in how school selection plays a role in ninth grade academic achievement. There is a need to identify the role choice plays in school selection and ninth grade success. Choice plans have been evaluated on the number of participants, not on the benefit of student choice and individual academic success (Ravitch, 2010). According to Schwartz (2009), motivation has been positively correlated with performance on standardized tests. Positive emotion, engagement and meaning are all factors in determining a positive motivational outcome. Zvock (2006) suggests evidence between school characteristics, student connections and social contexts should be targeted to prevent dropping out of school. Choice and control are essential to well-being and Schwartz reports that as choices increase, well-being increases.

Theoretical Framework

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is an empirically based theory of human motivation, development and wellness. The theory focuses on types of motivation and

social conditions that enhance motivation. The components of SDT support positive outcomes through intrinsic motivation and link outcomes to increased achievement.

Early in the twentieth century, psychologists believed that motivation stemmed from the non-nervous system tissue needs (Grolnick, 1994). During the 1950s, studies began to emerge presenting human motivation evolving from innate psychological needs (Grolnick, 1994). The concept of intrinsic motivation first appeared in experimental psychology when Hullian's theory concepts were found to be inadequate for explaining the exploratory behaviors of rats and monkeys (Deci, 2002). The Self-Determination Theory has empirical roots in experimental social psychology. Its theoretical roots extend to the organismic, ego-psychology and existential–phenomenological traditions. These traditions focus on the critical importance of human experience and meaning in the determination of action. They support the biologically inherent tendencies toward integrated functioning.

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a theory of human motivation, was conceptualized by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan. Deci and Ryan have conducted more than thirty years of research on self-determination since 1970. The theory evolved out of research on the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. In the first published studies (Deci, 1980), college students were paid for working on intrinsically interesting puzzles and the monetary rewards undermined their intrinsic motivation for the activity. More than one hundred studies supported the notion that rewards do not always motivate subsequent persistence; indeed, they can undermine intrinsic motivation.

According to Deci and Ryan (2008), to be self-determined is to feel self-effective. Autonomous motivation has been found to support greater conceptual understanding,

better grades, creativity and enhanced persistence at school. Being autonomously motivated means having a sense of choice. When students in school are more autonomously motivated, they obtain better grades and are less likely to drop out. Choice is an intrinsic motivator.

Deci and Ryan (2008) believe that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and autonomous motivation have positive outcomes that contribute to an enhanced well-being. Laboratory experiments, field studies, and observational methods by Deci and Ryan have examined the conditions that promote motivation relating the different forms of motivation. According to the Self-Determination Theory, the fulfillment of the psychological needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy has proven to result in motivation.

Additionally, Self-Determination Theory differentiates the types of motivation (autonomous or controlled). SDT posits that the type of motivation is more important than the amount of motivation and that humans require fulfillment of specific psychological needs to function optimally and have psychological health. Psychological needs are universal and essential for all people, regardless of sex, ethnicity socioeconomic or cultural values (Deci and Ryan 2008). Deci and Ryan identify the psychological needs as competence, relatedness and autonomy. Filling one's psychological needs creates the emotional state required to be a motivated individual.

The psychological need of competence is defined by Deci and Ryan (2008) as feeling effective in dealing with one's inner and outer worlds. Competence is learning to manage oneself. Knowing that one is improving in a meaningful aspect of one's life is gratifying and represents a satisfaction of the basic need of competence. The

psychological need of relatedness is the feeling of being connected to other people. The need of loving or being loved, of caring or being cared for, belonging to groups, having relationships of mutual trust, sharing mutual conversations are all examples of relatedness. The psychological need of autonomy involves having a feeling of full willingness and choice. Autonomy is endorsing one's actions fully. Deci and Ryan maintain that people have a fundamental need to fully endorse their actions and to feel free. Meeting all three psychological basic needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy enhances one's motivation.

Deci and Ryan (2008) contend that there are different types of motivation, autonomous and controlled motivation. They also contend that type of motivation is more important than the amount of motivation. Self-Determination Theory describes intrinsic motivation as behaviors that are willingly enacted in the absence of contingencies, rewards or punishment. Extrinsic motivation is characterized by the energy that directs other human activities. Extrinsic motivation can be an autonomous or controlled motivation. If a person can internalize the external factor and accept it, it becomes autonomous. When parents make choices for their child, and the child can identify with the value of the choice, this choice is viewed as autonomous, not controlled. According to SDT, people who are intrinsically motivated are self-determined and see themselves as initiators of their own activities and having an opportunity to make their own choices.

Self-Determination Theory researchers have examined links among autonomy-supportive classrooms and achievement. Classrooms where students are motivated and feel supported in inquiry learning tasks have been linked to higher achievement among students. Autonomy-supportive classrooms have students who become intrinsically

motivated because of the supportive learning tasks. Deci (1981) found that autonomy-supportive classrooms led to increased intrinsic motivation and satisfaction of the competence need. Ryan and Niemiec (2009) found that a rationale for behaviors given in an autonomy-supportive way led to fuller internalization and more engagement in learning. Benware and Deci (Deci, 2009) linked autonomy support to enhanced deep learning and conceptual understanding. Vansteenkiste (Deci, 2009) found that intrinsic rather than extrinsic learning goals led to greater learning. Positive feedback and choice were predicted to enhance experiences of competence and self-determination, fostering greater intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation was a link to positive academic outcomes. For students transitioning into the ninth grade year, supporting choice in school selection could be a beneficial factor. In this study, SDT will be applied to investigate how choice plays a role in the level of academic performance for students who choose their ninth grade school.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how choice in the selection of schools contributes to ninth grade academic achievement. While there is extensive research on ninth grade achievement, dropout risk factors and student motivation, there is a gap in the literature in how choice plays a role in ninth grade academic achievement and school selection.

Ninth grade is a pivotal year for students. According to Neild et al. (2008), many difficulties in the ninth grade year can be attributed to the transition year and the students' lack of connections or feelings of empowerment. Empowered students are more motivated to perform and feel competent leading to academic success (Houser and

Frymier, 2009). According to Deci and Ryan (2008), having the ability to make choices can lead to intrinsic motivation. In turn, intrinsic motivation can lead to academic achievement. School failure at the start of high school in ninth grade has been shown to have a negative impact on the ability to graduate in four years and a factor to dropping out of school ((Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Further investigation into the relationship of choice and ninth grade success is needed to decrease the factors that contribute to dropping out of school. The ability to choose a school at such an important time in a student's academic career may offer an opportunity for engagement and connection resulting in positive academic achievement.

Research Question

The following question will guide the study:

Do ninth grade students, who participate in the school of choice process and are placed in their first choice high school:

1. have a higher grade point average

2. have improved attendance

3. earn more credits at the end of their ninth grade year

compared to students who were placed in their third choice high school or those students who were placed in their sixth choice high school?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it investigates the role of choice and its impact on ninth grade achievement. There is little information in the literature to address the role of choice in ninth grade achievement and how it supports positive student outcomes for this essential grade level. The ability to choose a school at such an important time for

students may offer positive academic benefits to ninth graders. As a result, this study may offer practitioners valuable information on whether systems of school choice benefit individual students. Unlike other studies, this research does not focus on school choice as an improvement of the school system, but on the significance it can have for students who participate in school choice. Findings may contribute to changes in school policies so that they more effectively benefit individual students. Findings may also prompt policy-makers and school administrators to examine administrative operations with student placement to maximize ninth grade student potential.

Literature reviews indicate that dropping out of school is a cumulative process increasing the importance of ninth grade. As dropout rates increase, the monetary effect is adverse on society (Bridgeland, 2010). Cutting the number of dropouts in half would generate $45 billion annually in new tax revenue. Somebody who lacks a high school education will have lifetime earnings that are only about 60% of those of somebody with that education. The study hopes to influence policy changes that can benefit ninth grade students and decrease the cumulative process of dropping out of school by studying school selection and placement for students entering the ninth grade.

Definition of Terms

Choice. Choice is a motivating factor when the options meet the students' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Choice is motivating when the options are relevant to the students' interests and goals (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Disengagement. Disengagement refers to students who do not feel connected to school and do not perform academically (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Schools of choice. District programs aimed at giving families the opportunity to choose the school their children will attend. School choice does not give preference to one form of schooling or another; rather manifests itself whenever a student attends school outside of the one they would have been assigned to by default. The most common options offered by school choice programs allow students to attend other public schools, private schools, charter schools, tax credit and deductions for expenses related to schooling, vouchers, and homeschooling (NYSED, 2012).

Schools of choice selection process. A process in which students complete a school choice application and are placed in a school from their choice selection. All students who complete a school choice application are entered into a random lottery matching highest possible choice to seat availability (USCD, SOC policy, 2001).

Transition. Transition refers to the time when students move from one grade to another grade in a new school (Gaper, De Luca & Estacion, 2011).

Chapter Summary

Research has demonstrated that ninth grade is a pivotal year for secondary school success or failure (Reinhard, 1997). Nationally, 45% of ninth-graders fail one or more subjects in their first year of high school (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). In addition, the nationwide failure rate of ninth-graders has tripled in the last 30 years (Jonsson, 2004). It is evident that students are struggling in our schools. Ninth grade achievement continues to be a grave area of concern. It is during ninth grade that many students must earn passing grades to accumulate high school credits. Yet, ninth graders have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes and the majority of failing grades. According to McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) transitions to high school and

increased graduation requirements are reasons for students struggling and dropping out. Across the country, students are transitioned as ninth graders into schools not of their choosing or assigned to neighborhood schools.

There is a need to identify the role choice plays in school selection and ninth grade success. The original schools of choice plans were designed to desegregate schools and create equal opportunities regardless of color, race, or family background (Ravitch, 2010). The types of choice plans have expanded over the last five decades since desegregation efforts. Currently, schools of choice plans may include magnet schools, private and parochial schools, voucher plans and charter schools. Furthermore, school accountability citations under NCLB (2001) have altered school choice policies by requiring other schools to be available to students in cited schools.

Deci and Ryan (2008) support that when a parent makes a choice for a child, and the child recognizes the value of the choice, the child internalizes the choice as his/her own choice. In other words, the choice made by a parent is as significant as if the child is making the choice. Making choices is motivational and motivation has been found to support greater conceptual understanding, better grades, creativity and enhanced persistence at school. Hence, being autonomously motivated means having a sense of choice. For a student, choice and motivation can have a positive academic outcome. Choosing a school can help a ninth grader feel motivated, support academic interest and hinder factors that contribute to dropping out of school.

The next chapter will analyze relevant empirical literature in the areas of dropping out of school, ninth grade achievement, schools of choice, motivation and academic

achievement and student transitions. Chapter 3 will discuss the study methodology

design and Chapters 4 and 5 will discuss study results.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Numerous empirical studies have focused on understanding the effects of dropping out of school. These studies have examined school characteristics and student outcomes. Such studies focus on students, not school systems. The literature review discusses areas of education that have an impact on urban students in order to assist those most vulnerable in an educational setting.

Urban ninth graders in public schools grapple with imposed academic accountability and school support. In addition to academic struggles, poverty, low socioeconomic status and violence can be common struggles for urban students (Samuel, Sondergeld, Fischer, & Patterson, 2011). Such endemic struggles can confound academic accountability requirements, making it harder for ninth graders to achieve (Samuel et al., 2011). To address such struggles, student choice has been aligned to indicators of academic achievement. In addition, choosing a school can be a motivational factor for a student which can contribute to academic success. Motivation has been found to support greater conceptual understanding, better grades, creativity and enhanced persistence at school (Loyd, 2005).

The literature review focused on contributing factors for ninth grade success as they relate to student choice. First, the chapter will examine significant empirical findings from 2000-2011 on ninth grade achievement and dropping out of school. Second, the literature review examined factors related to dropping out of school and ninth grade

achievement. Third, schools of choice, student motivation and academic achievement were examined. Finally the literature review examines student transitions.

Dropping Out of School and Ninth Grade Achievement

Academic failure, disciplinary reasons, employment opportunities and family care are some of the reasons why teenagers leave school. Stearns and Glennie (2006) examined two aspects of dropping out of school: a) whether reasons for dropping out of school differed across grades and age groups and b) whether reasons for dropping out varied among gender and ethnicity across grade and age level groups. Their analysis of 14,525 dropout students indicated that 74.6% dropped out at age 16 or below, 20.2% at age 17 and 5.2% at age 18 or above. Results showed that for each ethnic group, Native Americans, African Americans and Latino, dropout rates were the highest in the ninth grade. Males were also the highest dropout group in the ninth grade. Academic reason gained importance as a cause for dropping out of school with ascending grade levels (grade 9= 6.5%, grade 12=10.4%). Ninth grade had the highest percentage for leaving school because of disciplinary reasons (10.7%). African American males were more likely to be thrown out of school because of disciplinary reasons more than any other ethnic group (22.1%). Every ethnic and gender group had a steady increase in the percentage leaving school for academic reasons, except for Latinas. White females were less likely than white males to leave school for academic reasons. Contrary to the hypothesis, African American males and females were less likely than White males to leave for academic reasons. Latinos had the highest significance for a dropping out school because of moving, while African American had the highest significance for disciplinary reasons.

The study found variation by grade level, age, gender and ethnicity in reasons for dropping out of school. Though Stearns and Glennie (2006) examined aspects of dropping out of school, connections to school context were not studied. The importance of understanding school experiences and dropping out of school was further supported by Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007), an important element in dropout prevention.

Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) conducted a study investigating school characteristics and student outcome data related to dropout rates. A sample of twenty schools with the highest dropout rates was compared to a sample of twenty schools with the lowest dropout rates in Kentucky. Quantitative data for two consecutive years was obtained from the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) and the Kentucky Center for Safety School (KCSS) resulting in a sample of 196 schools. A three stage analytical process was used to determine school characteristics in relation to school dropout rates. Variables studied included: a) school demographics, environment, disciplinary procedures; b) classroom environment and instruction; c) administrator characteristics, philosophies attitudes and behaviors; d) staff characteristics, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors; and e) student characteristics and behaviors.

Christle et al. (2007) found significant positive correlation between dropout rate and the following school characteristics: retention, socio-economic status, law violation, and board violation. Law violations were student actions resulting in arrest which result in expulsion from school or alternative placement from school. Board violations were student actions against school district board policies that did not result in arrest or law violations, but resulted in expulsion, suspension or alternative placement for the student. As demonstrated in Table 2.1 (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007), dropout rate and

academic achievement, school attendance, successful transition and percentage of White

ethnic background students had a significant negative correlation. Gender, school size

and expulsion rate did not have a significant dropout correlation for the 196 schools

studied. Further correlations between dropout rate and school variables are displayed in

Table 2.1

Determination Between Dropout Rate and each School Variable

Variable	M	SD	r		r^2
CTBS-NP total score	37.27	37.13	-0.680 [*]		46.2%
Attendance rate	92.83	6.90	-0.679 [*]		46.1%
Retention rate	6.71	11.83	-0.630 [*]		39.7%
Law violation rate	1.64	7.31	0.395 [*]		15.6%
Suspension rate	21.90	25.75	0.362 [*]		13.1%
Percentage white	90.03	55.18	-0.246 [*]		6.1%
Percentage male	50.60	10.16	0.187		3.5%
Enrollment	823.00	729.00	-0.154		2.4%
Expulsion rate	0.20	0.00	-0.045		0.2%

[*] $p < .004$

The correlations among the many factors demonstrate that dropping out of school

happens over time, not as a one-time impulsive decision. Of the 196 schools studied,

twenty schools with the highest student dropout rates differed significantly from the

schools with the lowest student dropout rates. These schools differed on the school

characteristics of academic achievement, attendance, retention and suspension. Schools

with high dropout rates had administrators with less experience, and poor school climate.

For low dropout rate schools, staff dressed professionally, buildings were in better

condition and there was a higher level of adult supervision. Academic achievement and

attendance variables showed the highest correlations to school dropout rate. Positive

relationships were also found between suspension and dropout rates. The study further

demonstrated that dropping out of school was not an impulsive action, but a cumulative

process. This cumulative process is an important factor when considering the importance

of ninth grade achievement. The study failed to connect this cumulative process to the

importance of a particular grade level, but a study in Texas in 2010 did support the

importance of the ninth grade.

The relationship between ninth grade retention and dropping out of school in a

rural Southeast Texas High School was studied by Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore

and Onwuegbuzie (2010) focusing on students who did not obtain the minimum of

credits to be promoted from Grade 9 to Grade 10. Of the 1, 202 transcripts analyzed,

there were 563 male students, 639 females students, 21.3 % African American, 25%

White, 52.4 Hispanic, 1.2% Asian and 0.1% other ethnicity. The analysis revealed that

students who were retained were six times less likely to graduate on time. Those students

who were not retained in ninth grade were 85% more likely to graduate on time.

Bornsheuer et al. (2010) demonstrated that retained students had a higher chance of

dropping out. The study had additional implications regarding the cumulative process

leading to dropping out of school and timely intervention for struggling students. The study supported the importance of the ninth grade year.

Another key study supporting the cumulative process affecting dropping out of school was the qualitative study of Brown and Rodriguez (2009). Brown and Rodriguez examined the life of two Latino students who became dropout statistics, even though each had passed the respective State high school exit exam. Their study examined the everyday experiences of dropping out in the cultural and structural contexts and aspects of school for these two Latino students. During the 2003-2004 school years, both students attended two different high schools in the Northeast. Both students were males from Puerto Rico, lived in low income households with a single mother. Both attended high minority and high poverty schools. The study sought to capture data on experiences in the cultural and structural context of both participants' lives. The participants' progressive disengagement was evident. For one of the students, disengagement was evident as the school was not offering rich, intellectual experiences. For the other student, it was the school's lack of help during course difficulties. Multiple factors were identified during the study: low academic expectations, menial curricula, lack of caring, gender and racial stereotypes, and overburdened staff as contributing factors to student disengagement. For the researchers, it was alarming as to discover how inconsequential these life altering events of both boys were to the school culture. No practices were changed and no new policies were reviewed even though there were two students, who had met graduation exam criteria, and had opted to drop out of school. Brown and Rodriguez (2009) highlighted the importance of student engagement in the cumulative process of staying or dropping out of school. They further demonstrated the importance of expectations in a

supportive school environment and ninth grade. Students were not able to connect to the school where they were placed and lacked the support systems to be successful from the beginning of the ninth grade year. Brown and Rodriguez raised awareness of minority student expectations and dropout rates suggesting the need to further address school support systems, especially for minorities.

Yowell (2002) suggested that associations between expectations and academic outcomes function differently for ethnic minority students. Other studies, such as the study by Ream and Rumberger (2008), sought to find the relationship between behavioral and social aspects of schools with dropout rates and school completion among Mexican Americans. Ream and Rumberger's longitudinal study of data from approximately 25,000 eighth graders included family background, students' engagement behaviors, grades and educational aspirations, diverse characteristics of adolescents' friendship networks and information on school completion. Results of the study indicated that Mexican-Americans were slightly less engaged than White students in academic activities that were informal and not directly structured by the school. School preparation and athletic preparation were significant predictors for dropping out for both groups and each significantly reduced dropout rates for Whites. The number of dropout friends emerged as a significant predictor of school dropout rates for both groups as well. The study concluded that engagement behaviors were significant positive predictors for both Mexican-American and White students. The researchers noted that though disadvantaged minorities had the most to gain from these positive predictors, their social contexts had a limited pool of engaged friends, thus, decreasing the opportunities to enhance their well-being.

Yowell (2002) also indicated that social and school contexts are integral to a students' engagement process in school. Disengagement in schools can produce dropout risks for any student. Transitions are important phases in a student life, but may also present challenges (Rosenbloom, 2009). Students traditionally transition into schools after their sixth grade and eighth grade years. It is important to recognize the significance of school contexts and student connections, especially during transitional years.

Schools of Choice

To support the implementation and development of desegregation plans, choice in public education was expanded in the 1970s to meet the Civil Rights Act mandate (Ravitch, 2010). School districts used choice to augment curricula and provide students in diverse educational settings with alternative schools. With NCLB, choice was further supported with federal policy requiring the opportunity for other school placements to students in low performing schools.

In an effort to investigate Schools of Choice and student achievement, Okpala, Bell, and Tuprah (2007) conducted a study on the differences of student academic achievement in selecting similar public middle schools, including traditional schools and schools of choice. The study was conducted in a southeastern school district in North Carolina using school data from 1997 through 2001. The purpose of the study was to examine significant differences in middle school achievement in year-end test scores in reading and mathematics for traditional schools and schools of choice. Approximately 13,800 students participated in choice schools during the study years. The sampling was selected from schools with similar demographics and school size. Results indicated that students in schools of choice had a higher reading achievement score in middle school.

This study concluded that though choice programs had been developed to enhance desegregation, desegregation had not occurred. African American students were most likely to enroll in traditional schools. Wealth had the most influence on outcomes and supports. The effects of choice and achievement were not examined in this study, demonstrating a gap in the literature. It was not clear if achievement levels in schools of choice were higher because of the impact of a higher socio-economic level for those students or their choice of school. The study did not address a correlation between ninth grade achievement and choice, or dropping out of school to choice of school.

Trying to establish a propensity to graduate and schools of choice, Lauen (2009) used a propensity score analysis to evaluate student tendency to graduate on time for 16,532 students enrolled in 410 Chicago schools who participated in a school of choice process. Students were administratively assigned to one of 49 public high schools. Of these students only 42% attended their assigned schools. The balance of the sample enrolled in other public, private or programs in the city of Chicago. Sixty two percent of the students in the analytic sample graduated in four years. Results demonstrated the propensity gap between school choice and neighborhood choice differed with socio economic levels of students. Higher levels of socio economic status were associated with higher graduation rates. The study was not able to find evidence of racial-ethnic differences in the choice benefit. The study was able to correlate higher test scores from students with low socio economic status in schools of choice. The study further implied that schools of choice could be a key to provide a path of opportunities for students who had not been placed in neighborhood schools and chosen their school of choice. The

study was not able to distinguish between the consequences of choice and the act of choosing.

Robert (2010) argued that schools of choice benefit high-status families. The more selective schools perform better and students with economic means can attend these high performing schools. Interestingly, Robert's study demonstrated that ability grouping did not improve achievement. Only religious schools were able to impact students from low socio economic status with support compensating for the disadvantages.

Rosenbloom (2009) conducted a study about students assigned to schools they did not choose. Rosenbloom, in an exploratory investigation, examined the effects of schools of choice on non-admit students. Non-admit students were those students whose applications to selective New York City schools were rejected and not allowed to attend the school of choice. The students were assigned their neighborhood schools. Rosenbloom held longitudinal interviews for four years with thirty minority students focused on how attending a neighborhood high school they did not choose affected attitudes toward peers and school. Some prevalent themes from the interviews were discussions about transferring and low expectations of high schools. The study concluded that school choice policy in New York City was more than a process of academic satisfaction for some students; it was a process of psychological and social factors for all students. Researchers found that non-admits were trapped in a system with less academically competitive students and were unable to access more successful schools. In New York City, only 45% of students receive admissions to selective schools each year, leaving the other students to attend neighborhood schools, schools they might not feel

connected to or have chosen. The students studied struggled to find connections in their assigned schools.

Militello, Metzger, and Bowers (2008) argued that competition among schools was not a benefit for students in the school selection choice. School districts use the school selection choice process to benefit from the per-pupil state funding. School choice has created a competition between schools to attract students inclusive of construction enhancements to existing school buildings, offering of new curricula and program additions. This competition became a school student selection, not a student school selection. Jennifer Jennings (2010) supported the notion that the school of choice process has become one to recruit high performing students. Jennings' ethnographic research in New York study demonstrated how some high schools used the school of choice process to target students and not support the entrance of others. The process became one where schools were selecting students, not students selecting schools.

Cobb and Glass (2009) argued that schools of choice plans had the potential to increase the integration of schools, but there was not enough evidence to declare their ability to improve academic achievement. Cobb and Glass do support the ability of schools of choice plans to expose students to new cultural and social forms of a school community that otherwise would have been unavailable for the student. This acceptance into a new community can be motivating for students.

Motivation and Academic Achievement

Scholars believe motivation impacts learning. Deci and Ryan (2008) argued that choice, an intrinsic motivation action, has a direct impact on student performance. Their empirical studies supported that autonomous motivation leads to greater conceptual

understanding, better grades, creativity and enhanced persistence at school. Being autonomously motivated means having a sense of choice. According to Deci and Ryan, when students in school are more autonomously motivated, they obtain better grades and are less likely to drop out.

   Self-determination theory. To understand choice and student achievement it is important to understand Self-Determination Theory, conceptualized by Deci and Ryan. Self-determination theory (SDT) consists of five mini-theories. The five mini-theories are: Cognitive Evaluation Theory, Organismic Theory, Causality Orientation Theory, Basic Psychological Needs Theory and Goal Contents Theory. Each mini-theory identifies a facet of motivation supported by field research studies connected to positive human outcomes. Each of these mini-theories is an important component to autonomous motivation and individual satisfaction with choice. Choice plays an important role in student empowerment. Student empowerment contributes to student achievement (Deci, 2008).

   The first mini-theory is known as Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET). This mini theory presents the effect of social contexts on intrinsic motivation. CET was presented by Deci and Ryan in 1985. CET supports that rewards, communications and feedback lead to feelings of competence which can enhance intrinsic motivation. In order for the feelings to lead to intrinsic motivation, they must be accompanied by a sense of autonomy. Individuals must feel their behavior to be self-determined. They must feel satisfaction of the needs of both competence and autonomy for the intrinsic motivation to be maintained or enhanced. Studies by Deci in 1971 and Harackiewicz in 1979 showed that positive performance feedback enhanced intrinsic motivation while negative

performance feedback diminished it. Studies in classroom learning have also supported the enhancement of intrinsic motivation with positive performance feedback. Deci, Nezlek and Sheinman conducted studies in 1981 demonstrating how teachers were able to catalyze students' intrinsic motivation, curiosity and desire for challenge. Students, who were overly controlled and did not feel autonomy or self-determination lost initiative. They learned less well in instances where creative processing was an essential task in the required conceptual outcome. For activities to support intrinsic motivation, they must have an aesthetic value to the individual. To understand the motivation for activities that are not inherently interesting or of value the individual, Self- Determination Theory looks at the nature and dynamics of extrinsic motivation.

The second SDT mini-theory is Organismic Theory (OIT). This mini theory addresses the topic of extrinsic motivation and the different forms of extrinsic motivation that promote or hinder internalization. SDT recognizes subtypes of extrinsic motivation that are a part of a continuum of internalization. The more internalized the extrinsic motivation, the more autonomous the person will feel. These subtypes are identified as: external regulation, introjection, identification and integration. The continuum goes from amotivation, a state of lacking an intention to act, to intrinsic motivation. Organismic Theory studies social contexts that enhance or stall internalization. The theory has observed those behaviors and contexts that lead people to resist, partially adopt or deeply internalize values, goals or belief systems. This mini-theory supports autonomy and relatedness as critical to internalization.

The third mini-theory, Causality Orientations Mini-Theory (COT), describes the individual differences in people's tendencies in regulating behavior as an orientation

toward the environment. In 1985, Deci studied how autonomy was significantly and positively related to measures of ego-development, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Controlled orientation has also been positively associated with public self-consciousness. The Causality Orientations Theory describes and assesses these orientations as: autonomy (person values what is happening and behaves out of interest), control (focus is on gains, rewards and approvals) and impersonal or amotivated (person has anxiety concerning competence). Causality Orientations Theory research has demonstrated that the causality orientations and the types of social contexts make parallel predictions of the type of motivation.

The fourth mini-theory is the Basic Psychological Needs theory. It elaborates the concept of psychological needs and the relation to emotional and health well-being. The theory supports that optimal well-being is dependent on autonomy, competence and relatedness. All three needs are essential in the type of motivation. Studies (Ryan 1996) have shown both the necessity of basic need satisfaction for well-being and the importance of the basic needs as mediators of the effects of social contexts on wellness.

The fifth mini-theory, Goal Contents Theory (GCT) develops from the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic goals and the impact of these on motivation and wellness. Research studies in this area showed that, when people rated the extrinsic aspirations as being strong relative to the intrinsic aspirations, they evidenced less self-actualization and vitality. They also evidenced more depression, anxiety, and narcissism (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Intrinsic aspirations or life goals include personal growth, affiliation, and community. Extrinsic goals included wealth, fame, and image. Niemiec in 2009 further studied that the attainment of intrinsic aspirations was associated with greater well-being

and less ill-being, while the attainment of extrinsic aspirations did not enhance well-being but did relate to greater ill-being. Williams in 2000 further showed that people develop stronger intrinsic life goals when their parents are accepting, affirming, and autonomy supportive, but they develop stronger extrinsic goals when their parents are rejecting and controlling.

In addition to the five mini-theories, Ryan, Deci, and Moller (Ryan & Deci, 2008) conducted three experiments to investigate the relationship between choice and ego-depletion. In the first experiment, participants were invited to participate in a study on persuasion and problem solving. Participants who were in an autonomous-choice condition showed significantly greater persistence than those participants in controlled-choice conditions. The second experiment manipulated the choice for participants with enticements. Once again, participants in the controlled-choice condition performed less and worse than those in an autonomous-choice condition. For the third experiment, participants made two decisions related to choosing activities. For all three experiments, there was a significant difference in the level of energy, vitality and persistence in the conditions representing autonomous choice versus controlled choice. Choice had a direct, positive impact when it was autonomous.

Motivation and ninth grade. To investigate if motivation mattered in student achievement Long, Monoi, Harper, Knoblach, and Murphy (2007) conducted a two year long cross-sectional investigation on GPA and motivation of eighth and ninth grade students from a large urban Midwestern high school in the United States. Two hundred and fifty five eighth graders (123 boys, 132 girls) and 159 ninth graders (83 boys and 75 girls) were selected for this study. For the students in Grade 8, 87% were African

American, 10% White and 3% other. Approximately 61% received free or reduced price lunch. For the ninth grade sample, 72% were African American, 22% White and 6 % other. Fifty six percent received free or reduced lunch. Results demonstrated a significant decrease in GPA for ninth grade as compared to their eighth grade GPA. The lower GPA for ninth graders further supported the failure of ninth graders in earning credits toward the tenth grade. Students, in both grade levels, had moderate levels of all three motivational variables (self-efficacy, domain interest and personal goal orientation). Self-efficacy consistently contributed to achievement for Grade 8 and Grade 9 students. Interest was a significant contributor to achievement in ninth grade. The study concluded that self-efficacy and learning goals significantly contributed to the students' domain interests. The study supported the importance of motivation and achievement including autonomous motivation with goal setting as indicative of higher achievement. Long et al. also highlighted interest being an important element for ninth grade students. Interest is an important component of motivation and choice.

In an attempt to tie supportive environments with students' motivational choices that can affect student achievement, Somers, Owens, and Piliawsky (2008) examined how several life context factors affected academic success for urban African Americans. A large, urban public high school in the Midwest provided the sample of 118 African American ninth grade students. Results demonstrated that the types of support alone were not predictors of grades, but they were correlated to grades. Given the decline in GPA during the Grade 9, the researchers presented the importance of preventive and intervention programs at the ninth grade level, which supports ninth grade being a pivotal grade for high school achievement.

Looking at motivation through the lens of resilience, Wasonga, Christman, and Kilmer (2003) sought to increase the understanding of student support systems that could predict resilience and academic achievement in high school students. Resilience was defined as the ability of individuals to overcome personal and environmental adversities effectively. Student data were obtained from a Midwest urban high school. Results demonstrated student relationships with adults and peers were better predictors of resilience than academic achievement. High peer expectations were a predictor of academic achievement among ninth graders, unlike other grades. Once again the importance of the ninth grade was evident in the study.

Contrary to peer expectations, Wong, West, and Cusick (2002), sought to prove that self-worth could predict motivation and impact student achievement in ninth graders. The researchers sought to establish self-worth as a predictor to motivation and achievement. Results of the study indicated that variables of autonomy support and perceived competence contributed significantly to the motivational orientation and performance within a particular domain. The results also indicated a need to maintain a sense of competence among students.

Connection, motivation, support and resilience have been identified as factors for positive outcomes. A six year study followed an urban middle school cohort from Grade 7 to Grade 12 examining how key events, structures and relationships supported student resilience leading to graduation (Samuel, Sondergeld, Fischer, Patterson, 2011). Choices made by students supported graduation or the exit of the established path. The study demonstrated the importance of student support and school connections.

Samuel et al. (2011) conducted a case study of 346 middle school students from 2001-02 to 2006-07, from an urban district in the Northwest. The study demonstrated that those students who had been retained once and students who were older than the "model age" were a high risk for dropping out of school. There was a strong correlation between graduating on time and extracurricular involvement. The study concluded that goal setting could be a counterattack to low level involvement from parents. Samuel's study also concluded that dropping out is a longer process than many recognize. Students as early as Grade 7 were exhibiting signs of dropout factors. Samuel's study also contended that factors that contributed to dropping out of school could be overcome with interventions that dealt with attendance, behavior support and teacher expectations.

Student Transitions

Schools can provide support and important connections for students. At the start of every school year and during the year, many students transition into new schools. The educational system in the United States expects certain transitions to occur after Grade 6, and after Grade 8. While for some the experience of entering a new school may be viewed as positive, especially at expected transition time, the direct impact on particular students continues to be unclear (Newman, 2000).

Transition and its possible correlation to disengagement and potential dropping out was an area of interest in the study of Gasper, De Luca, and Estacion (2011). The study sought to determine the effect of high school mobility as a precursor to dropping out. Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1997) were collected to compare teenagers who switched high schools with similar teenagers who stayed in the same high school. The dropout rate for those who stayed in the same high school was

8.1%. The dropout rate for those teenagers who attended two or more high schools was 19.1%. Teenagers who switched schools were most likely to live in a central city, socioeconomically disadvantaged, come from single parenting households and a teenage mother pregnancy. These youth were also less attached to their father, and their parents were less likely to volunteer in schools. Youth with a high propensity to switch schools were four times more likely to report being bullied, three times more likely to fight in schools, ten times more likely to be involved in theft, and four times more likely to be suspended. For those teenagers who were most and least at risk for a school change, the school change was not a major factor in any decision to dropping out of school. For students who had high risk factors, changing schools did not further increase their already high chances of dropping out. The two groups of teenagers who were in the middle of the propensity strata, those who were not the least at risk or the worst off, seem to dropout at higher rates if they changed schools. Gasper et al. concluded fewer than 30% of high school students attend more than one high school. Students who changed schools were more likely to drop out if they had risk factors, such as behavioral problems, lower test scores, school absences, substance use, poverty and residential mobility.

Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, and Sanchez (2000) examined urban, minority, low-income adolescents from their eighth grade year through their transition to senior high school. The focus of the study was on transition related changes and the long term effects on final academic outcomes. There were 137 eighth grade participants from two public, inner city schools, 57% females, 92% minority, including 76% Latino and 16% African American. Results of the study indicated that students who reported greater change in perceptions of school-based social support in the transition from Grade 8 to high school

graduated, while those who experienced no change dropped out. Students whose grades changed less, graduated at a higher rate than those who grades changed drastically. All but six students' grades dropped after the school transition into high school. Dropouts did not have a significant change in their perception of social supports. Graduates felt less supported at times and exhibited a significant change in perceived social support, but were less upset about it. Students who dropped out were slightly behind their classmates academically at the beginning of ninth grade. Dropouts did experience weaker academic self-perceptions. Of the variables, only social support and academic performance emerged as significant factors in school transition and school completion. The study was able to conclude the importance of providing adequate social contexts during transition. Students who were not able to connect became disengaged. Disengagement had a significant effect on dropping out.

Newman et al. (2000) studied the relationship between school environments to academic achievement during transitional years. The size of the school, the types of classes offered and dynamics of peer relationships were factors in the success of students. Important to this research was the role the mother played in the life of the researched students. Students in the transitional year, who had significant guidance from their mother, achieved better than those students who did not have the guidance.

On the other hand, Cooper and Liou (2007) argued that students who were not given information on how to pursue and achieve academic and career goals would not be successful in their high school career. The empowerment students needed to achieve success in high school was necessary in the ninth grade and many urban students lacked

the guidance, the empowerment and the peer relations needed to succeed. The type and level of support seem to be significant for students during their transitional year.

Chapter Summary

Ninth grade achievement is pivotal for the success of a student to graduate and avoid dropping out of school. Students who lack connections and school success are most likely to drop out of school. Disengagement in schools pose dropout risks for students. Transitions are important phases in a student life, but may also present challenges for academic achievement and school connections, thus becoming a factor in dropout rates (Rosenbloom, 2009). Research continues to suggest that associations between expectations and academic outcomes function differently for ethnic minority students, but are important for all students, especially in the ninth grade. The ability to choose a school at such a pivotal time in a student's academic career may offer an opportunity for engagement and connection resulting in positive academic achievement.

School districts have used choice to augment curricula and provide students alternatives in diverse educational settings. Schools of choice became an opportunity for public school students in the 1970s. To support the implementation and development of desegregation plans, choice in public education was expanded to meet the Civil Rights Act mandate (Ravitch, 2010). In the 2000s, choice has been further supported with the NCLB federal policy, making performing schools available to students who attend low performing schools within the same school district.

Deci and Ryan (2008) argue that choice, an intrinsic motivation action, has a direct impact on student performance. Their empirical studies supported that autonomous

motivation has been found to support greater conceptual understanding, better grades, creativity and enhanced persistence at school.

There is a need to further study how school choice can support or hinder student transitions, thus impacting achievement. The lack of ninth grade achievement has been correlated with transitions affecting achievement in several empirical studies. Studies over the past 30 years have linked student motivation and empowerment as significant indicators of student success (Brooks & Young, 2001). This suggests further investigation into the relationship of choice and ninth grade success. The methodology to conduct the study of how choice in the selection of schools contributes to ninth grade achievement will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

General Perspective

Nationally, 45% of ninth-graders fail one or more subjects in their first year of high school (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). Failing courses can delay a student's graduation path. Research has demonstrated that ninth grade is a pivotal year for secondary school success or failure (Reinhard, 1997). According to Neild et.al, (2008), the many difficulties students experience in their ninth grade can be attributed to the transition year and the lack of students being able to make connections or feel empowered. Making connections to schools can be a significant deterrent to the cumulative process of dropping out of school. Connections empower students. Empowered students are more motivated to perform and feel competent, leading to academic success (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Empowered students feel autonomy when making choices and decisions about their schooling. According to Deci and Ryan (2008), having the ability to make choices can lead to intrinsic motivation. Thus, intrinsic motivation can lead to academic achievement.

Studies over the past thirty years have linked student motivation and empowerment as significant indicators of student success (Brooks & Young, 2001). Some students enter high school with numerous challenges that impact their ability to be academically successful during high school and ultimately result in failure to graduate in four years (Rumberger, 2008). Deci and Ryan (2008) argue that choice enhances academic achievement. Perhaps, students who choose their school have a better chance at

succeeding and help making the ninth grade year a successful one. With federal accountability mandates from No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), parent and students can access schools that are not underperforming. This school selection choice may benefit those students who wish to access a different school for their ninth grade year.

Ravitch (2010) argues that school selection choice has been evaluated based on plans of charter or private benefits, not focusing on the fidelity of the student need and choice. Choice plans have been evaluated on the number of participants, not on the benefit of student choice and individual academic success. School accountability under NCLB (2001) rates schools in good standing or need of improvement based on student performance on State testing. Such school ratings and the mandate to offer parents alternative schools have influenced school choice policies requiring better rated schools to be available to students in underperforming schools. Though this federal requirement of offering parents and students' choices has been in effect since the development of the law, evaluations of choice plans have been based on the number of participants, not on student outcome and benefits (Ravitch, 2010).

The original schools of choice plans were designed to desegregate schools and create equal opportunities regardless of color, race, or family background (Ravitch, 2010). Parents always had choices among private and religious schools. NCLB has brought public school choices to parents and students. If society believes that choice and control are essential to well-being and Schwartz (2009) reports that as choices increase, well-being increases, then how can choice play a role for students who choose their ninth grade school? Does choosing a school make an academic difference for ninth graders? Further investigation into the relationship of choice and ninth grade success is needed.

The purpose of this study was to explore how choice in the selection of schools contributes to ninth grade academic achievement. The following question guided the study:

Do ninth grade students, who participate in the school of choice process and are placed in their first choice high school:

1. have a higher grade point average

2. have improved attendance

3. earn more credits at the end of their ninth grade year

compared to students who were placed in their third choice high school or those students who were placed in their sixth choice high school?

This question led to a quantitative analysis. This quantitative analysis sought to determine the effects of choice in a statistical comparison. As in causal-comparative research, the causes were studied after they have had an effect on the variable (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005). The analysis could suggest a causal relation was present with choice of the high school selection and academic achievement. This research was experimental with an analysis of covariance to determine if the treatment of choice made a difference.

Research Context

The study took place in an urban school district in the Northeast region of the United States. This urban district (UCSD) enrolled 31,279 students for the 2010-2011 school year. The UCSD school district is ranked among the top fifteen districts in the nation for child poverty. During the 2010-2011 school year, 84% of all students were eligible for free or reduced-priced school meals. The ethnic breakdown of the district for the 2010-2011 school year was: 63% African American, 23% Hispanic, 3% Asian and 10% White. Eleven percent of the students were English Language Learners. Students

with disabilities comprised 18% of the student population. Graduation rate for the 2010-2011 school year was 51%. The district has a configuration of K-8 schools, K-6 schools, 7-12 schools and 9-12 schools and K-12 schools. There were five 9-12 schools and nine K-8 schools.

Research Participants

UCSD is a school district that offers eighth grade students an opportunity to select a ninth grade school. In UCSD, the process of school selection for the "eight go nine" grade students is called the School of Choice process. Students entering the ninth grade participate by completing an application selecting a school of their choice for grade 9. Eighth grade students may choose to not participate in the School of Choice process. Eighth graders in schools that have grades 7-12 may choose to remain in those schools and do not have to complete a School of Choice application. The majority of students who participate in the school selection process for Grade 9 are those students who are in K-8 school buildings. Of the 2183 eighth graders in UCSD, approximately 600 students enter a School of Choice process, representing those students seeking to choose a ninth grade school.

Each November, UCSD eighth grade students are invited to complete a school choice selection for their upcoming ninth grade year. Students receive an application which allows them to choose from a variety of schools that have interest to them. Each school has a program that is unique to the school's vision. Students return completed applications with a parent signature to the district office. The district enters student application choices into the district school selection database. The student's school choices on the application then become part of a lottery system. The system assigns school preference with available school seats to each student who submitted an

application. The random lottery assignment given to the student comes from the seven choices the student submitted on his or her application. Prior to the random lottery run, the school district determines the number of available ninth grade seats for each school and for the lottery random assignment. After the lottery is run and student choices are matched to available seats, school announcements are sent to students.

The ninth grade students who participated in the "eight go nine" grade selection process were subjects of this study. The school of choice selection process begins when students complete an application (Figure 3.1), with parent signature and ranking of up to seven schools of choice. The completed application is returned to the district. The application information for each student is entered into the district database. After all applications have been received, a random lottery with an algorithm is run to match the student choice rank of school to available seats in the school. After the match, the lottery assigns a school to the student for the ninth grade. The school selection data is recorded in the district data student management system.

Ninth grade students who participated in the school selection process and received their school choice selection placements were compared in the areas of grade point average, attendance, ninth grade credits earned, gender, ethnicity and school student attended in the eighth grade. To support the grade point average analysis, report cards for each marking period were analyzed. The analysis included the demographic information of each student. An analysis among choice placements was completed in the mentioned areas: students who had Choice One placements compared to Choice Three placements, and Choice Six placements. The comparison of Choice One to Three to Six was chosen because of the statistical spectrum of six not being a desired choice and three being in the middle of the choice group. The information compiled and the analysis determined if

choice played a role with ninth grade academic achievement, attendance and credits

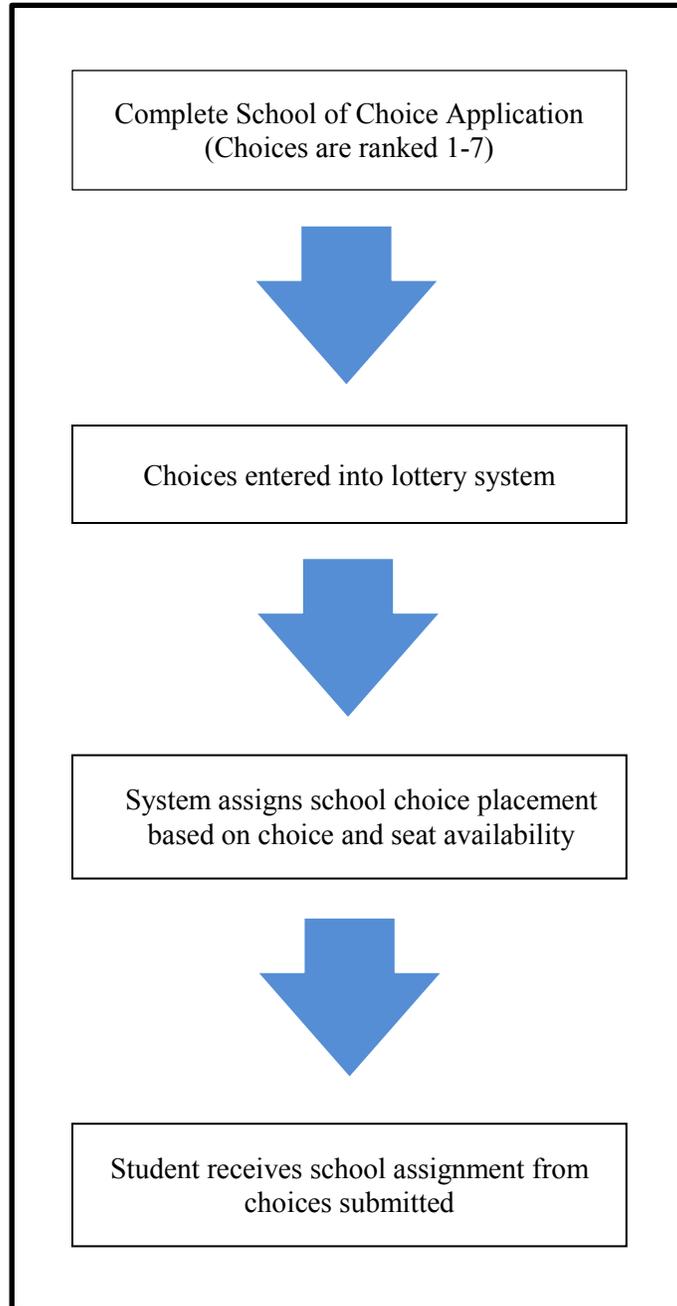earned. Comparisons with demographic information and school attended in Grade 8 were

made.

Figure 3.1. School of choice process.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

The district granted permission for a district programmer to extract from the district historical database the school selection lottery from 2010-11. This historical district school selection lottery database is the original source of data for the schools of choice selection process. Subjects for the study were ninth grade students who participated as eighth graders in the school selection process to choose their ninth grade schools. Once the data from the school information system was obtained from the programmer, the researcher applied the established criteria to the database for subject selection: a) engaged in schools of choice in grade 8 in 2011, b) attended the school they were assigned to by school of choice process, c) remained enrolled during the ninth grade school year.

After identifying the students who met the established criteria, the researcher extracted from the district student management system the students' demographics, report cards, transcripts, attendance history from the eighth and ninth grade and school attended in the eighth grade. Demographics included age, gender and ethnicity. The researcher gathered all the information and the district programmer assigned each student selected an identification number to protect the confidentiality of all subjects. The programmer placed the database of the selected subjects' demographics, ranked choice of school placement, grade point average in the ninth grade, each marking period report card achievement, attendance from the eighth and ninth grade, credits earned in the ninth grade, school attended in Grade 8 and Grade 9 school assignment in a password protected file. The researcher used the database of the protected file to run the ANOVA analysis.

Procedures Used for Data Collection and Analysis

The following steps were used to complete the study during the Spring Semester of 2013:

1. Requested permission for the study from UCSD.

2. Requested permission for the study from the Institutional Review Board at St. John Fisher College.

3. Obtained dataset from the district programmer from the 2011 Schools of Choice historical database during the month of January 2013.

4. Examined school of choice selection lottery database and established criteria for subject selection: a) participated in schools of choice in grade 8 in 2011; b) attended the school assigned through the school of choice process and c) remained enrolled during the ninth grade school year.

5. Identified the selected subjects from the school selection database who met the criteria to be part of the study analysis.

6. Gathered subject information from the district student information system: report card grade point average for each marking period, attendance from eighth and ninth grade attendance, transcript, ethnicity, age, gender and school student attended in the eighth grade.

7. The district programmer assigned a unique identification number to subject selected database to protect identity and maintain confidentiality. The information was delivered to the researcher in a password protected file.

8. Categorized the file subject database by ethnicity, age, gender, credits earned, grade point average for each marking period and total for the year, attendance and school student attended in eighth grade.

9. Organized subject information for school of choice selection for subjects who were assigned to their first choice school selection.

10. Organized subject information for school of choice selection for subjects who were assigned to their third choice school selection.

11. Organized subject information for school of choice selection for subjects who were assigned to their sixth choice school selection.

12. Calculated descriptors of the entire dataset for all subjects and all choices specific to the factors: a) Grade Point Average by marking period and at end of ninth grade year; b) attendance rate from eighth and ninth grade, and c) credits earned at the end of ninth grade.

13. Calculated descriptors of Choice One group specific to the factors: a) Grade Point Average by marking period and at end of ninth grade year; b) attendance rate from eighth and ninth grade; and c) credits earned at the end of ninth grade.

14. Calculated descriptors of Choice Three group specific to the factors: a) Grade Point Average by marking period and end of ninth grade year; b) attendance rate from eighth and ninth grade; and c) credits earned at the end of ninth grade.

15. Calculated descriptors of Choice Six group specific to the factors: a) Grade Point Average by marking period and end of ninth grade year; b) attendance rate from eighth and ninth grade; and c) credits earned at the end of ninth grade.

16. Ran a statistical analysis of the entire subject database set within each choice group on the variable of attendance, grade point average and credits earned to establish a mean.

17. Ran a statistical analysis of the entire subject group database within each choice group inclusive of demographics and school attended in Grade 8.

18. Ran a statistical analysis of the differences among Choices One, Three and Six groups on the variable of attendance, grade point average and credits earned.

19. Ran a statistical analysis of the differences among Choices 1, 3 and 6 groups inclusive of demographics and school attended in Grade 8.

20. Computed a ratio of the variance within the groups to determine significant statistical difference among group means.

The methodology was a quantitative experimental study. The analysis used ANOVA with post hoc or planned comparisons. The compiled data was analyzed by comparing results of those students who received their first choice assignment against those students who received their third choice school assignment and those students who received their sixth choice assignment.

The students who received their first choice assignment were the experimental group. Students placed in the third and sixth choice schools were the control groups. A statistical significance of the differences on one or more variable or factors was run within the groups among the groups computing a ratio of the variance between the groups. The analysis determined if choice played a significant role with ninth grade academic achievement, attendance and credits earned. All subject information remained

confidential and no personal identifying data was revealed. All data collected was

maintained and secured with a password protected server during the study.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how choice in the selection of schools

contributed to ninth grade achievement. UCSD is a school district that offers eighth grade

students an opportunity to select a ninth grade school. In UCSD, the process of school

selection for the "eight go nine" grade students is called the School of Choice process.

The ninth grade students who participated in the "eight go nine" grade selection process

were subjects of the study. Students who received their first choice school selection were

compared to students who receive their third and sixth choice school selection

assignment. This research is experimental with an analysis of covariance of factors of

grades, attendance and credits earned, to determine if the treatment of choice made a

difference for ninth grade students who choose their school. Included in the statistical

analysis was ethnicity, gender, and school attended during the eighth grade. The ratio of

the variance among groups determined a significant statistical difference. The researcher

determined if the means of the various groups equaled to one another with the statistical

analysis.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore how choice in the selection of schools contributed to ninth grade achievement in UCSB, a large urban district. Chapter 4 presents the research findings of the study. Using a quantitative experimental study of An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with post hoc or planned comparisons, ninth grade students who participated in a school selection process and received their school choice selection placements were compared in the areas of grade point average, attendance and ninth grade credits earned. The research question helped guide the data analysis:

Do ninth grade students, who participate in a school of choice process and are placed in their first choice high school:

1. have a higher grade point average

2. have improved attendance

3. earn more credits at the end of their ninth grade year

compared to students who were placed in their third choice high school or those students who were placed in their sixth choice high school?

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section summarizes the demographic data of the students who entered the school selection process. The next section, organized based on the research question, provides an analysis within the choices of the school selection process in the studied areas. The final section provides an analysis of whether choice in the selection of schools contributed to ninth grade achievement.

Demographic Data

The study took place in an urban school district in the Northeast region of the United States. This urban district (UCSD) enrolled 31,279 students for the 2010-2011 school year. UCSD is a school district that offers eighth grade students an opportunity to select a ninth grade school. Of the 2,183 eighth graders in UCSD in 2010-2011, 524 were leaving a K-8 grade building and needed a ninth grade school for their next placement. The rest of the students entering Grade 9, 1659 students, were in 7-12 school buildings and opted to stay in their existing 7-12 school. Of the 524 eighth grade students, 394 students participated in the ninth grade school selection process. There were 130 students who opted to not participate in the school selection process and received a random school assignment. UCSD recorded student school choices in the district school selection database. Each student's school choices were entered into a lottery data system. The lottery data system assigned the school preference to the student among the choices made. Those students who did not participate in the school selection process were assigned a ninth grade school after the lottery assignments were made, thus giving preference of school assignments to those students who were part of the school selection process (see Figure 4.1).
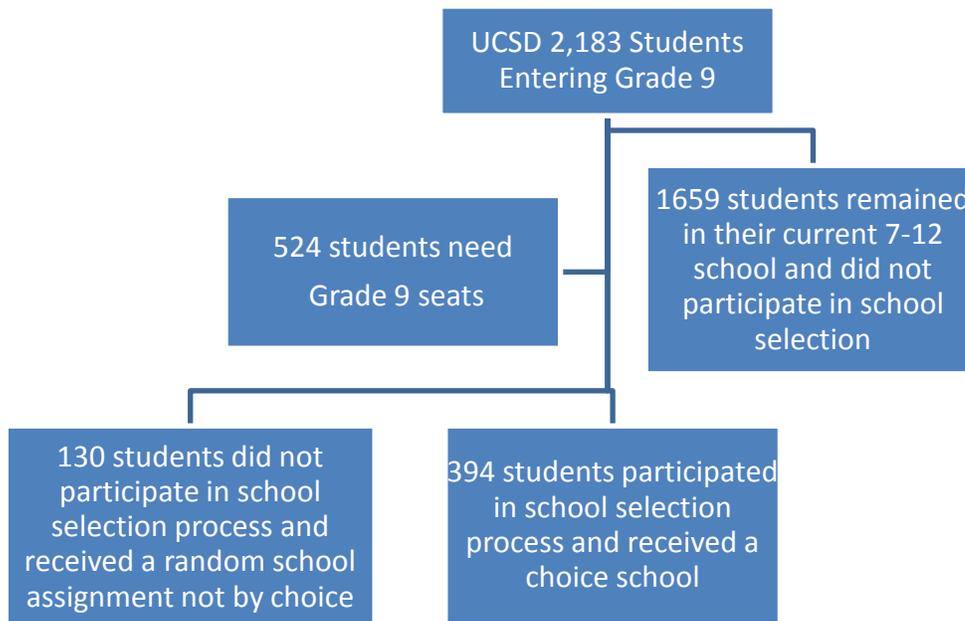
Figure 4.1 School assignments for students entering grade 9 at UCSD.

The 394 eighth grade students who participated in the school selection process in 2010-2011 were the subjects of the study. The researcher obtained the school choice selections, assigned choice school, ethnicity and gender of the subjects. Of the 394 eighth grade students who participated in the school selection process, three students were missing credits and grade point average data. These three students missing credits and grade point average were excluded from the study. The remaining 391 students were organized by school choice selection, ethnicity and gender. Table 4.1 illustrates students by school choice selection, ethnicity and gender. Students who were placed in their first choice school belong to the Choice 1 group. Students who were placed in their second choice school selection belong in the Choice 2 group. See Table 4.1 for all students placed in the respective choice groups. The table gathers the information for each choice group with regard to gender and ethnicity.

Table 4.1

Students and School Choice Selection Received

Choice	*n* *	female	male	Asian	AA*	H	W
1	230	119	111	9	169	30	21
2	51	29	16	9	30	10	2
3	41	27	14	3	31	7	0
4	25	15	10	0	14	9	2
5	17	12	5	1	12	4	0
6	13	9	4	0	10	3	0
7	10	5	5	1	4	5	0
8	4	1	3	0	2	2	0
N/A	3						

n * = number, AA* = African American, H* = Hispanic

The study sought to explore how choice contributed to ninth grade achievement for students in Choice 1, 3 and 6. The choice groups were selected based on the statistical significance of choice with the highest, middle and lowest groups. Thus, a higher choice could be measured with significance. Students in Choices 2 and 4, a total of 76 students, were not included in the analysis because of the continuum of choice significance, being first (Choice 1), middle (Choice 3) and bottom (Choice 6). After sorting the data, the decision was made to combine students in Choices 5, 6, 7 and 8 as a group. This decision was made for statistical significance in comparison to the number of students in each

group and as a combined group. The guiding question would address the data analysis for students in Choices 1, 3 and 5-8. Thus, 315 students were part of the analysis.

Data Analysis and Findings

The first data analysis and finding was based on the portion of the research question: Do ninth grade students, who participate in the school of choice process and are placed in their first choice high school have improved attendance? The percentage of attendance for each student was determined by dividing the days attended by the number of days in the school year, 180 days.

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was the test used to determine the statistical significance of the differences among the mean scores of the three groups for the variable of attendance. Figure 4.3 compared attendance for the choice group means for the 315 students in Choice 1, Choice 3 and Choice 5-8. Table 4.2 displays the compared group means by analyzing comparisons of the variance estimate of attendance with school selection choice. In Table 4.2 the statistical significance for attendance variance was analyzed among choice groups and between choice groups. The significance of attendance was significant among groups with a p value of .074. The ANOVA was calculated to examine the effects of choice on attendance. Those subjects in Choice 1 had a significant higher attendance than subjects in Choice 3 and 5-8.

Table 4.2

ANOVA - Percent Attendance

	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	Sig
Between Groups	0.417	2	0.074	6.623	0.002
Within Groups	3.470	312	0.011		

Robust tests of equality of means further supported the assumption of normality of the dependent variable within each group. These robust tests check for the assumption that the group variances were statistically equal. Table 4.3 below demonstrates that the groups were statistically equal, meaning that all populations each have a normal distribution. If tests are not robust it implies that there are violations of the assumption that each population follows a normal distribution, particularly for small alpha levels and unbalanced layouts.

Table 4.3

Robust Tests of Equality of Means - Percent Attendance

	Statistic	*df*	*df²*	Sig
Welch	4.099	2	62.031	0.021
Brown-Forsythe	3.782	2	92.113	0.026

Subjects in Choice 1 had a significant higher attendance rate than subjects in Choice 3 and 5-8 (See Table 4.4). Students in Choice 1 had a 94.4% rate of attendance. With a 180 days possible to attend, this represents students having missed an average of 10.1 days of school (5.6% x 180 days= missing 10.1 days of school). Choice 3 students with 90.1% attendance missed 17.8 days of school (9.9% x 180 days= missing 17.8 days of school). Choices 5-8 had an 89.1% of attendance having missed 19.6 days of school (10.9% x 180 days= missing 19.6 days of school). The district average is 90%, meaning students miss an average of 18 days of school. Students in Choice 1 missed about half as many days as the other Choice groups. Students in Choices 5-8 missed a full month of school. Figure 4.2 shows days absent by choice group and the district average of 18 days missed.
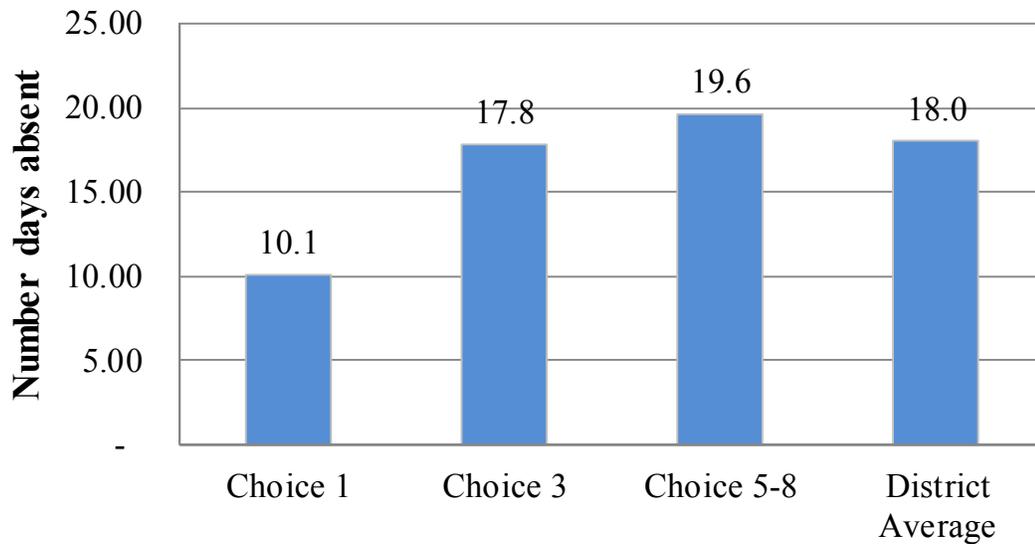
Figure 4.2. Days absent by choice group.

There is a pronounced difference in the standard deviation between Choice 1 and the two other Choice groups (Table 4.4). There is an approximate 60% difference in the standard deviation among the groups. Students in Choice 1, not only have a significantly better attendance, the lower standard deviation reveals a greater consistency in attendance of the Choice 1 students compared to the other choices. Students in Choices 5-8 missed nearly twice as many days with a standard deviation 60% larger. Thus, students in Choices 5-8 were less consistent in their attendance. The mean difference among the Choice groups is significant at the .005 level (Table 4.5). Students in Choice 1 had better attendance than the district average for students. The district average is 90%.

Table 4.4

Perfect Attendance

Choice	N	Mean	Percentage	Std. Dev.	Std. Error
1	230	0.944487	94.4%	0.0860138	0.0056716
3	41	0.901017	90.1%	0.1430047	0.0223336
5-8	44	0.891491	89.1%	0.1492550	0.0225010

Table 4.5

Post-hoc Multiple Comparisons - Percent Attendance

Choice	Choice	Mean Dif.	Std. Error	Sig.
1	3	0.0434694	0.0178783	0.047
	5-8	0. 529956	0.0173533	0.007
3	1	-0.0434694	0.0178783	0.047
	5-8	0.0095262	0.0228922	1.000
5	1	-0.0529956	0.0173533	0.007
	3	-0.0095262	0.0228922	1.000

Note: the mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

ANOVA assumes normally distributed data and as the data was further analyzed, a skewness was discovered. A normally distributed model assumes data will follow a normal distribution. When the data demonstrated skewness, it was an observation of specific data being numerically distant from the rest of the data. This observation, an

outlying observation or outlier, can be indicative of a measurement error or that the specific population has a heavy tailed distribution. Statistically, this is referred to as kurtosis. The kurtosis number for a normal distribution was peaked for 11 subjects. Eleven subjects were not like the other subjects in the dataset. For some unknown reason, the eleven subjects were not like the sample gathered. Because ANOVA assumes a normal distribution, and to bring a norm to the curve, 11 subjects were removed from the above analyzed data. The new data set became 309 students. New tests were run and the significance of attendance was marginally significant among the groups with a *p*-value of .071 (Table 4.6).

Table 4.6

ANOVA - Percent Attendance

	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	Sig
Between Groups	0.033	2	0.016	2.664	0.071
Within Groups	1.871	306	0.006		

Though the new dataset had less significance than the previous dataset, the results still support the established pattern of students in Choice 1 having a stronger attendance pattern with a standard deviation of more consistent attendance (See Table 4.7). Students in Choice 1 had an attendance rate of 94.7%. Students in Choice 3 had an attendance rate of 92.5%. Students in Choice 5-8 had an attendance rate of 92.2% (Table 4.5 and Table 4.6). The district average compared at 90%. Figure 4.3 shows the attendance average by choice groups and the district average of 90%.
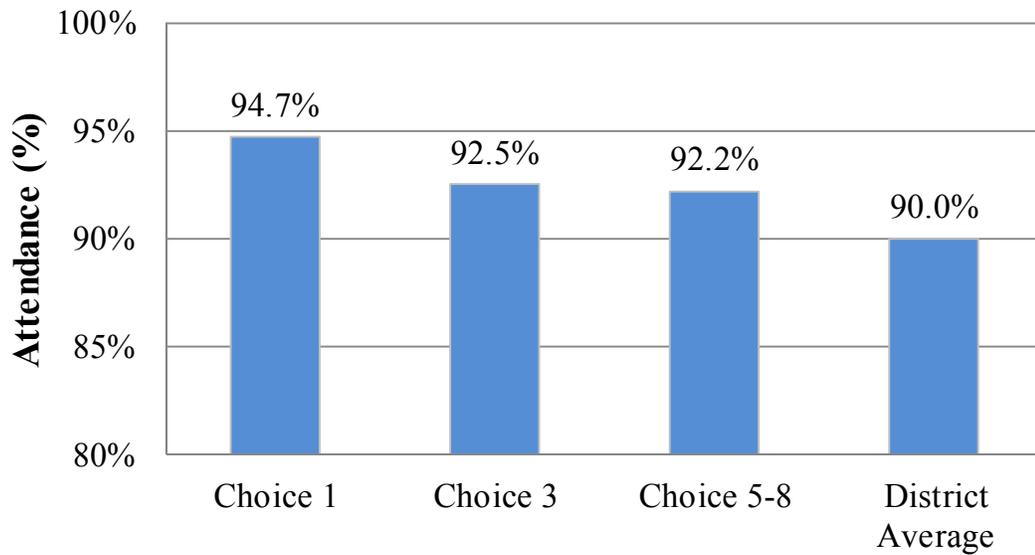
Figure 4.3. Attendance average by choice.

Tables 4.7 and 4.8 show the statistical results among choice groups for attendance. Students in Choice 1 had a significantly better attendance represented in the mean attendance of 95%. For students in Choice 1, the lower standard deviation revealed a greater consistency in attendance. Students in Choice 3 had an attendance mean of 93%. The Post Hoc tests show the multiple comparisons among the choice groups with attendance. The mean is not significant within these groups, but students in Choice 1 supported better attendance averages than those students in Choice 3 and in Choice 5-8.

Table 4.7				
Percent Attendance				
Choice	*N*	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error
1	229	0.947584	0.0722126	0.0047719
3	39	0.925956	0.0918116	0.0147016
5-8	41	0.922580	0.0950573	0.0148455

Table 4.8

Post-hoc Multiple Comparisons - Percent Attendance

Choice	Choice	Mean Dif.	Std. Error	Sig.
1	3	0.0216274	0.0135443	0.334
	5-8	0.0250034	0.0132591	0.181
3	1	-0.0216274	0.0135443	0.334
	5-8	0.0033759	0.0174889	1.000
5	1	-0.0250034	0.0132591	0.181
	3	-0.0033759	0.0174889	1.000

Note. the mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The next data analysis and finding was based on the portion of the research question: Do ninth grade students, who participate in the school of choice process and are placed in their first choice compared to third and 5-8 choice have a higher grade point average? The Grade Point Average was the final year calculation on a 4.0 scale of six marking periods.

Table 4.9 has results of the ANOVA test for grade point average. In this study students' increased attendance did not translate into higher achievement during their ninth grade. A relationship was not established between choice groups and grade point average. The test result was not significant.

Table 4.9

ANOVA - Grade Point Average Final

	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	Sig
Between Groups	1.257	2	0.629	0.601	0.549
Within Groups	320.192	306	1.046		

A comparison among choice groups and grade point average during the first report card marking period, and the final average at the end of the year was run. Figure 4.4 demonstrates the mean grade point average among choice groups during the first marking period and the final grade point average. During the first marking period, Choice 1 had a mean GPA of 2.57, Choice 3 had a mean GPA of 2.48 and Choice 5-8 had a mean GPA of 2.48. For the final GPA, Choice 1 had a mean GPA of 2.03, Choice 3 had a mean average of 1.90 and Choice 5-8 had a mean GPA of 1.87. The analysis did not provide a statistical significance to any of the results yet the comparison showed a decrease for all groups from the first marking period to the final GPA. The group with the biggest decline in the GPA was Choice 5-8. Choice 1 had a decline of .54. Choice 3 had a decline of .58. Choice 5-8 had a decline of .61. Choice 1 group maintained the highest mean among all groups.
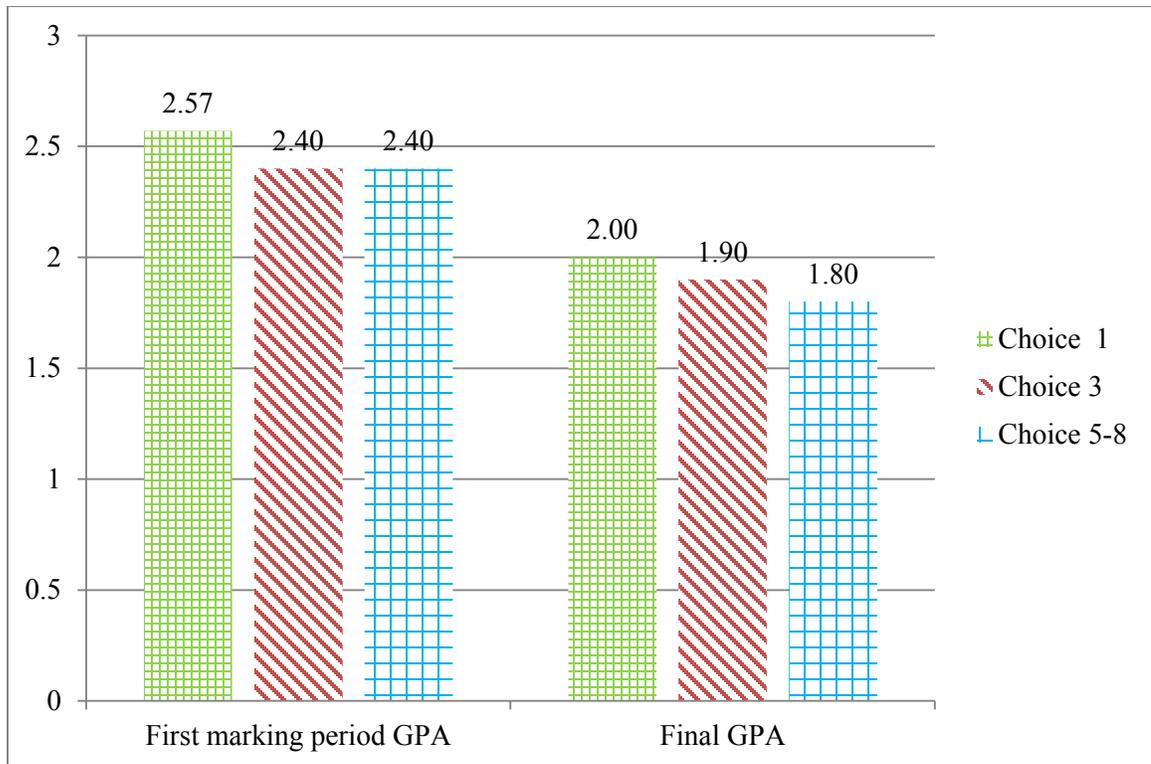
Figure 4.4. Grade point average of Choice groups.

The final data analysis and finding was based on the portion of the research question: Do ninth grade students, who participate in the school of choice process and are placed in their first choice earn more credits at the end of the school year? Credits earned were generated by the district database which assigns credits to like classes as per district guidelines and as they appear on the student academic transcript. Table 4.10 shows results of the ANOVA test for credits earned. A relationship was not established between choice groups and credits earned. The test results were not significant. All groups had a mean of 5 credits earned. The UCSD expects all students to be able to earn a minimum of 5 credits by the end of their ninth grade year. The mean for all groups suggested that students earned the minimum of credits. There was no value added to the type of credit earned by the ninth graders at UCSD. UCSD did not have a distinguished weight for

rigorous courses, thus a distinction among class rigor and credit could not be established
for the choice groups and credits earned.

Table 4.10

ANOVA - Total credits

	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	Sig
Between Groups	1.118	2	0.559	0.113	0.893
Within Groups	1510.943	306	4.938		

All choice groups compared in the three areas of analysis, attendance, GPA and
credits earned, demonstrated that students in Choice 1 had a higher performance in
attendance and grade point average. In addition to the three variables of attendance, credits
earned and grade point average, the researcher did further analysis to determine the impact of
gender, ethnicity or eighth grade school of choice. Further analysis in gender and ethnicity
did not provide significance within or among choice groups. A correlation between choice
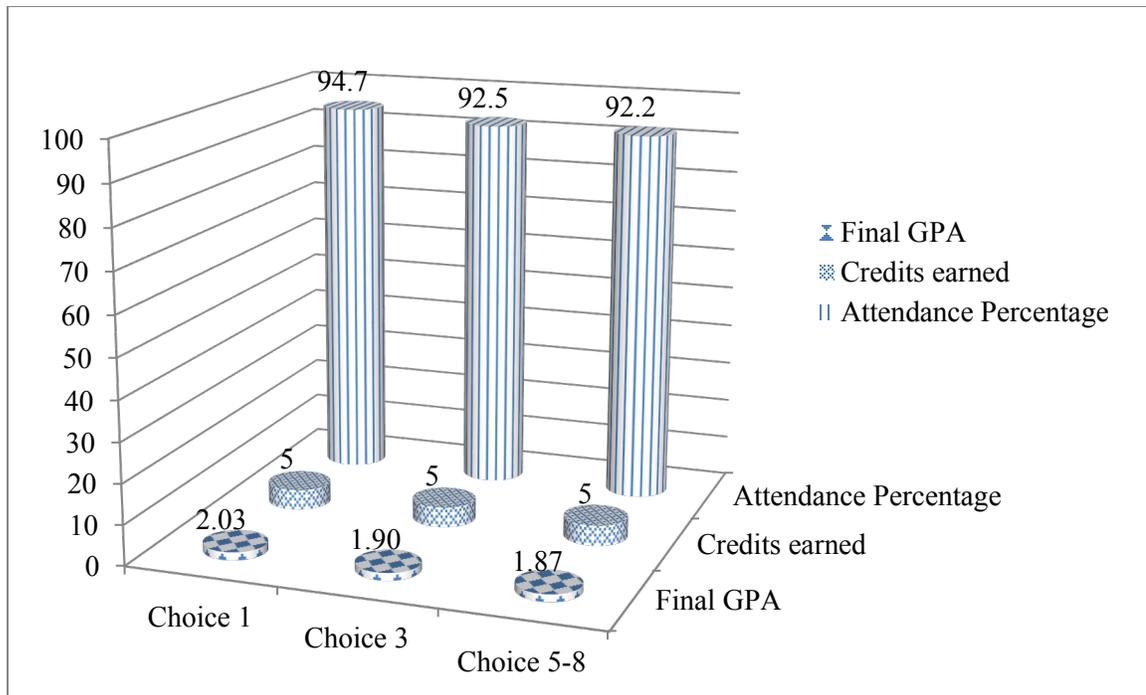groups and eighth grade schools could not be established.

Figure 4.5. Choice groups compared in areas of analysis.

Summary of Results

The purpose of the study was to explore how choice in the selection of schools contributed to ninth grade achievement. The research question: Do ninth grade students, who participate in a school of choice process and are placed in their first choice high school: a) have a higher grade point average; b) have improved attendance; c) earn more credits at the end of their ninth grade year compared to students who were placed in their third choice high school or those students who were placed in their fifth through eighth choice high school? An ANOVA was the test used to determine the statistical significance of choice. The analysis consisted of 391 students who participated in choosing a ninth grade school. The study demonstrated marginally significant results for students in Choice 1 for attendance. The differences in attendance among Choice groups was established in the study and supported by the standard deviation supporting that students in Choice 1 consistently attended school more often. There was no significance

for any students for grade point average or credits earned, though students in Choice 1 had a higher GPA than other Choice groups. Characteristics of student academic proficiency upon entry into the ninth grade were not part of the study. A correlation between Choice 1 and eighth grade school could not be established as a significant contributing factor to student success for a Choice group. Analysis in gender and ethnicity did not provide significance within or among choice groups. The discussion and interpretation of the results presented are discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how choice, in the selection of schools, contributed to ninth grade achievement in the United Central School District (UCSD), an urban school district in New York State. Chapter 5 presents implications of the findings in the areas of attendance, grade point average and credits earned. Limitations of the dissertation are discussed. Recommendations for future research in the area of education, policy and choice are also discussed. The chapter concludes with a summary of the dissertation.

Discussion of Findings

Poor student achievement and school choice continue to dominate the national discussion on school reform. For some urban districts, school selection is the initial sorting process for a ninth grade student. Yet, there has been little research to address the role choice plays on student achievement in school choice programs. School choice plans have been primarily evaluated on their ability to provide access and integration of race and class in school districts. Many choice programs simply monitor the distribution of students (Cobb & Glass, 2009). For students participating in school choice programs, the effects of choice on student outcomes should also be investigated as school districts, especially urban school districts, continue to grapple with low student achievement.

Findings from this dissertation study support and contribute to research in the area of ninth grade achievement and school selection in an urban district. In UCSD, 524

eighth graders needed a school for Grade 9. Of the 524 students, 394 participated in the

schools of choice selection process. The remaining 130 students did not participate in the

school of choice process. This dissertation focused on the 394 students who did

participate in the school selection process. The 130 students who did not participate in

the school choice selection process were placed by the district system, without any

consideration to a choice. The school placement consequences, if any, are not known for

the 130 students.

This dissertation study included three major findings regarding urban ninth

graders who participated in the school of choice process in UCSD. First, ninth graders,

who participated in the school selection process and were placed in their first choice

school had better attendance than other students. Second, ninth graders, who participated

in the school selection process and were placed in their first choice school, did not have a

significantly higher grade point average than the other ninth grade students. Third, ninth

graders, who participated in the school selection process and were placed in their first

choice school did not earn more credits at the end of their ninth grade year than other

ninth grade students. The three major findings of this study related to attendance, grade

point average and credits earned warrant further discussion.

Attendance. One significant finding of the study was that students placed in their

first choice schools had a higher attendance than students in other choice groups and

students district wide. As noted in Figure 5.1, Days absent by choice group, students

placed in their first choice school, had significantly higher attendance than students in

other choice groups. With 180 possible days to attend, students in Choice 1 missed an

average of ten days of school. The average attendance number of school absences for

UCSD students was eighteen days. Therefore, students in their first choice school, had a

higher attendance percentage than students in the other choice groups and the district average. These attendance findings support student choice and the positive impact choice has with increased attendance.
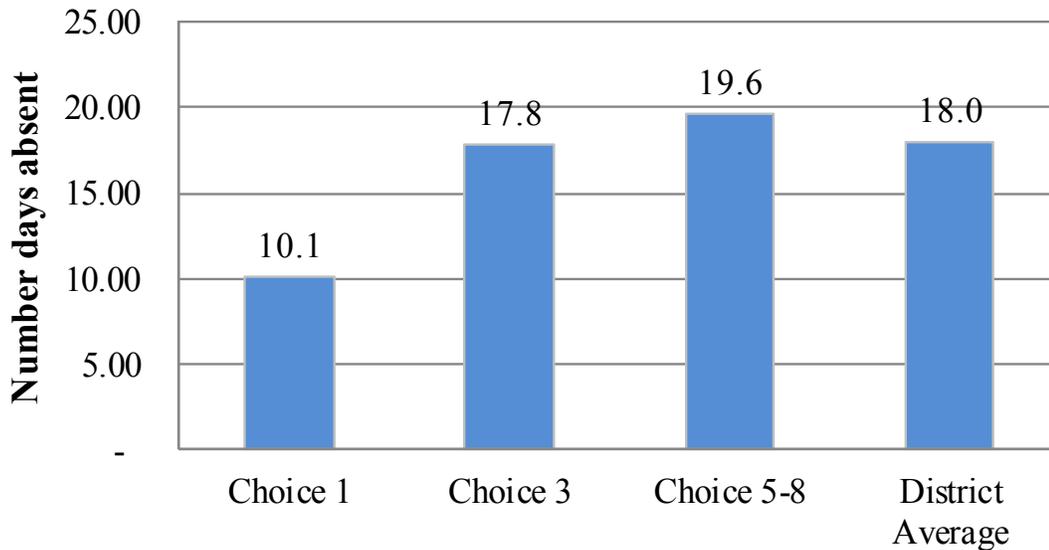

Figure 5.1. Days absent by choice group.

The importance of understanding student attendance, academic achievement and school connections cannot be understated. The findings of this study, related to attendance and students placed in their first choice school, are consistent with research asserting Choice Theory and the Self Determination Theory (Loyd, 2005; Deci, 2008). Both theories support choice as a pathway for empowerment. The dissertation findings suggest that it is important to provide students with empowerment opportunities that can translate to school connection. Students who feel empowered feel connected to schools. Therefore, attendance is one indicator of school connection and an indication that choice may empower students in this regard.

The results for students in the Choice Group 5-8, with a higher number of days absent than district students, can further support the need for empowerment and school connections. UCSD had students choose up to eight possible schools. Results of the

findings indicate that for students placed in schools in their fifth or higher choice, the role of choice had no impact on fewer days absent than students in higher choice groups or the district average.

Deci and Ryan (2002) have researched the positive effects of autonomy and choice in schools, organizations, health and athletics. The research evidence provides further thought to the schools of choice program at UCSD. Can placements in Choice 5 and higher, be even considered a choice? In light of the findings in this study, there is a need to evaluate the school selection program for students beyond Choice 3. It is important that all students entering the ninth grade receive an opportunity to succeed. Next to academic achievement, the rate of school attendance shows the strongest relationship to dropping out of school (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007).

Students need to be in school and attend regularly to improve their ability to graduate and meet academic requirements. The decision to exercise choice seems to be a consequential one for students in this study. The results of attendance for students placed in first and third choice schools suggest that for these students exercising choice was a positive benefit and a potential important pathway to an unseen opportunity. School attendance is an indicator to school connection with a greater possibility for positive academic school outcomes.

In spite of students wanting to feel connected, when the school environment or policies do not support student empowerment, disengagement occurs and choice begins to have less of an impact on student connections (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Students who experience academic success and/or become connected to adults and peers within the school setting are less likely to drop out of school (Dynarski and Gleason, 2002). Thus, one cannot minimize the effects that selecting a school can have on a ninth grader.

Ninth grade is a pivotal year for all students. A new school, new friends, and new academic expectations can impact school connections and students can feel disengaged. For urban students, transitions can add to their disengagement. Many urban students are faced with poverty and violence as common struggles in their daily environment. For urban students, an increased student and school attachment may be of great importance. The transition to high school can represent an important milestone for an urban student, but school transitions can also cultivate feelings of loneliness and disconnect. Student empowerment from choice autonomy of a school selection can be the difference for some urban students who have daily negative external influences that can impact educational withdrawal.

Urban students who become disengaged in school can be identified with many factors that contributed to the disengagement. Some of these factors can be academic struggles, lack of meaningful relationships, economic hardships, poor attendance and negative discipline behavior (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). Research has suggested that dropping out of school is considered to be a cumulative process, not an impulsive one (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). If the drop out process is cumulative, then the school of choice process can be a deterrent to dropping out of school. The school choice process can begin to establish the emotional comfort of an initial connection to school for all ninth graders. Findings in this dissertation study suggest that choice does improve attendance and can play an important role in facilitating educational persistence. Loyd (2005) investigated how choice increases students' perceived satisfaction in four areas of psychological needs: belonging, power, freedom and fun.   These findings have implications for students and schools, especially as to how it relates to school choice and student connections.

Factors that influence students' academic achievement can be related to students dislike for school (Zvoch, 2006). Evidence of school and student contextual relations is found in the study conducted by Brown and Rodriguez (2009). The life of two Latino students was examined by Brown and Rodriguez (2009) capturing the experiences in the cultural and structural context of schools and how the lack of caring were contributing factors to student disengagement. To further support the importance of school connections, Chapter 1 included narrative of the life of three urban students who yearned to be part of a school community and how the lack of school connection had devastating effects on one of the students. As with the case of Ramon in Chapter 1, the inability to engage in school resulted in Ramon dropping out of school even though he had demonstrated the academic ability to be able to complete high school.

School choice selection can begin to establish the emotional comfort for all ninth graders during a difficult transition time. The key to maintaining this comfort might be in the activities that connect students to school throughout the school year. The School Choice Process must be recognized as more than a placement or sorting process. Findings of this study suggest that choice can play a positive role in attendance. If school systems address this aspect of student connection there might be a chance of engaging a student. Otherwise, students who do not consistently attend will not have the opportunity to academically compete.

Grade point average. Research shows that 45% of ninth graders fail one or more subjects in their first year of high school (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). Clearly, the variables related to academic failure are complex and can be multifaceted beyond school attendance. Multiple factors could be identified as sources of the decline: low academic expectations for urban ninth graders, lack of academic ability, menial

curricula, teacher-student connections and lack of teacher preparation to differentiate instruction to support student achievement gaps.

With the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002, school districts have faced mandated academic accountability. Urban ninth graders in public schools are grappling with newly imposed academic requirements as required by No Child Left Behind federal standards (NCLB, 2002). Only two-thirds of American teenagers, and only half of all African Americans, Latino and Native American teens graduate with a regular diploma after four years of high school. The evidence of urban students being able to compete with the new standards is becoming increasingly more difficult. The achievement gap among urban and minority students continues to widen (Noguera, 2009).

Grade point average is used to measure students' academic achievement. In this study, there was no significance found among the choice groups and the students' grade point average. Though significance could not be found in the role choice played with school selection and increased grade point average, results of the study are consistent with research and ninth grade achievement. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) report that ninth grade continues to be a crucial year for students. Ninth grade students struggle academically, especially urban ninth grade students. As research suggests, students in the study in all choice groups demonstrated a decline in the grade point average from the first marking period to the final grade point average. It is important to mention however, that though students placed in their first choice school had declining grade point averages as the year progressed; the students in Choice 1 maintained the highest grade point average mean among all students. This finding supports the trend for students who are placed in their first school selection. Students placed in their Choice 1 schools outperformed students in other choice groups.

Further, the findings indicate a drop for all student groups' grade point average as the year progressed. This drop can be indicative of the transitional effects of ninth grade students. Increased academic demands and emotional factors contribute to decreased school achievement. As with academic demands, emotional factors have a direct impact on school achievement (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). The findings support the disengagement in academic outcomes with decline of the grade point average for all choice groups. The effects of this disengagement further suggest a problem for these ninth graders in their successful access to academic work, struggles with coursework and teacher and school connection. It can also suggest a teacher's struggle to support urban ninth grade students in their transition to a new school and new academic demands.

It would be alarming if these disengagement factors were considered inconsequential for schools, especially during transitional years. The array of struggles, an urban ninth grader has can affect the potential for graduation and remaining in school. Ninth grade school system practices need to be examined and policies reviewed to ensure that students are supported during transitions. The higher grade point average for students in their Choice 1 schools, at the beginning of the year, is consistent with the Self Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci, 2008). SDT supports that with choice there is initially increased academic achievement. If empowerment is not maintained, there is a decrease in motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2009). A decrease in motivation has an impact on student achievement. Thus, as referenced with attendance, choice has implications for student achievement and schools.

Students who are engaged in their learning have higher educational outcomes. Pedagogical practices are essential to support higher student achievement. Ninth grade school practices need to maintain student rigor and school relevance. Teachers who

practice having students create their own learning goals have better student achievement outcomes (Yowell, 2002). Urban ninth grade student achievement, classroom dynamics and teacher pedagogy must be recognized as important transitional factors that have an impact on student engagement and academic success. Districts need to prepare teachers for the uniqueness and importance of a ninth grader and recognize the role choice can play in school and student connections. It is the educational institutions responsibility to ensure that meaningful academic engagement exists for all students throughout the academic school year. Meaningful engagement may have positive effects on credits earned.

Credits earned. The third finding from this study concerns earned credits. Earned school credits are the indicator of academic success for high school students. All high schools have a minimal requirement of the number and type of school credits needed to graduate. In UCSD, in addition to the established graduation requirements, student grade designation was assigned based on the totality of credits earned for each year.

The study was conducted in a district that did not differentiate credits earned by the rigor or the type of course taken. Students in UCSD were required to have a total of five credits in any subject matter to be considered a tenth grader. For a UCSD student, the five credits earned may or may not have had an alignment with required graduation courses to ensure a pathway for graduation within four years. The district did not have any requirements to mandate that English 9, mathematics 9 or a science be part of the needed five credits earned for the assignment to the tenth grade. These inconsistencies did not allow for further analysis of the type of credit earned. Thus, students who were placed in their Choice 1 school did not earn more credits than students placed in other choice group schools.

Credit inconsistencies, in an urban district with steadily declining ninth grade averages, suggest the urgent need to evaluate district policy. Systems that do not guide students to graduate in the required four years because of a lack of credit requirements are seriously flawed. The findings of this study indicate specific implications for schools. There is a need to review policies to ensure that practices give students ample opportunities to succeed in mandated courses. Further, school district practices should not exacerbate the achievement gap for urban ninth graders.

District and schools must capitalize on practices that support ninth graders. The need to support transitions into a new school and teacher preparedness is evident. These support systems must be part of any school of choice program. Otherwise, the school selection process is a logistical exercise without lasting impact.

Results of the study suggest that for some students exercising school choice had a positive outcome. Results also suggested that after the school selection is made and student placed, there is a decline to the possible effects of choice. The study showed the lack of consistent academic support for students studied. Furthermore, the findings continued to support research on the importance of transitional years and the ninth grade. Research has pointed to the importance of the ninth grade and the struggles that ninth graders experience, but there has not been an established correlation of schools of choice programs in addressing the uniqueness of ninth grade students (Okpala, Bell, & Tuprah, 2007).

The findings support a link between perceived autonomy and attendance for students placed in one of their first three selected schools. It is important to provide students with a school environment that is academically supportive and enhanced with competence. The results demonstrate the need to view choosing schools as a holistic

process, not a sorting and placement process. Schools are part of a community and the reciprocal relationship cannot be ignored by parents, staff or students. The analysis of the importance of relationships among all community members is evident in research (Lauen, 2009). Educational outcomes, social contexts and knowledge development cannot be accomplished alone without the support of an educational community. For these reasons, school selection should reflect this community relationship. It would benefit school districts to look at the school choice process as a comprehensive process, not just a process to place students.

Limitations

This study presented some limitations. Purposeful sampling of students entering ninth grade was obtained, but in the year of the study, only 391 students participated in the school of choice process. A bigger sampling of urban ninth graders might have provided significant outcomes in the areas studied. Also, this study was conducted in one urban district. Analysis of findings from various districts might have allowed for more significant outcomes in all investigated areas.

Recommendations

Choice school selection programs are evaluated by the number of students that participate in the program, not by student achievement outcomes. This dissertation supports the need to measure success of school selection choice programs by student achievement. Findings in the study demonstrated how choice might play a positive role for students transitioning to high school.

School districts. For school districts the school of choice process must be viewed as a holistic process, not a sorting and placement process. School districts must recognize the needed support for all students who transition to new schools and use the

school of choice process as a vehicle to build support for the students. School districts

must recognize their responsibility to provide parents relevant information to make

informed decisions. Parents must know and understand the role choice can play to

benefit students. Districts must ensure that the school selection process includes all

students. UCSD mailed information letters and had one day of school informational

sessions. As a result of the lack of an effective communication and support plan for

parents, 130 students did not participate in the process. These families did not benefit

from the empowerment that choice could have brought to them in their new school. Deci

and Ryan (2002) contend that when parents make choices for their children, the children

internalize the choice as their own if they share the same values. It is important that

parents make informed decisions so that students can benefit from the choices made.

　　　With the growing interest in educational accountability, it is recommended that

schools invest in professional development for all school staff involved with students

transitioning to high school. School transitions can create disengagement for teachers and

students at both ends of the transition process. With support, students can acclimate to,

and school staff can support, the transitional phases of change. Perhaps this could be a

key to breaking the cycle of academic decline for ninth graders as they face new

challenges and expectations.

　　　As supported by the findings, it is imperative that the schools of choice school

selection process be viewed as a way to maximize student motivation, not one that traps

students into a school with no connection. Schools of choice programs can only be

successful if students benefit by showing social and academic growth. Otherwise, it

becomes one more program to satisfy NCLB regulations without consideration of the

impact on helping all students. It is recommended that school districts evaluate school of

choice programs in areas of parent communication, student participation and placement, and school transitional activities. It is important that school districts recognize the need of school programs to foster social and academic support for students during the new transitional school year. The support of the transitional year is needed to support student academic growth. The school of choice process needs to be viewed as a holistic process that supports the academic and social wellness of students who are new to a school.

School districts need to view school of choice as a comprehensive process that supports students, schools and parents. It is recommended that a set framework be considered to support this holistic view. The recommended framework would be a three stage process beginning with the application and ending with completion of the student's ninth grade school year (Figure 5.2). The initial stage of this suggested school of choice framework is informational for parents and students. It is important that there is adequate access to information about the process and school availability for all families. Savvy parents can have advantages to information and school choice if the process is complicated and not available in multiple formats and media outlets. The efforts to inform all parents must be more evident. The informational stage would begin during a student's eighth grade year. The importance of choice would be communicated and would match student interests and school offerings. Teachers of eighth grade students would be active participants during this informational stage to help match student interests and school choices.

The second stage of a school of choice framework would be the transitional stage. After school placements have been completed, the receiving school would provide transitional activities for parents, students and projected ninth grade teachers. This stage would maximize student and school connections by providing orientation activities.

These orientation activities would provide club and school activities information. The

transitional stage would involve school staff from potential high schools. This stage

would take place during the end of the eighth grade year, the summer and beginning of

the ninth grade year. The importance of professional development for school staff and

teachers in understanding student transitional stages would be essential to provide the

sustained support and positive outcomes during this phase.

The third stage of the schools of choice framework would be the supportive stage.

Academic rigor and school relevance would be key areas of support for the incoming

ninth graders. This stage would last the entire ninth grade student year supported by all

school staff. The Supportive Stage would be characterized by maintaining student

support and motivation for school. Evidence of a successful supportive stage would be in

the students' earning of rigorous credits by the end of the ninth grade. Only when school

districts measure the school choice program as it relates to student achievement

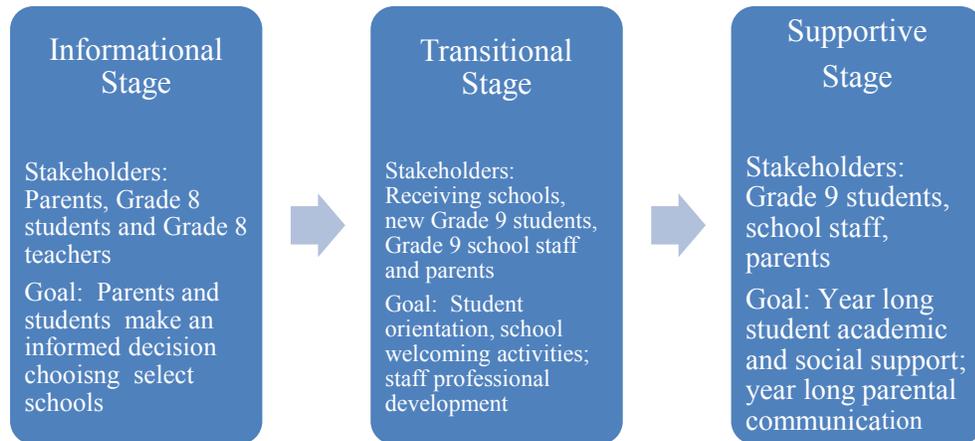outcomes, will an impact be felt, especially for urban ninth graders.

Informational Stage		**Transitional Stage**		**Supportive Stage**
Stakeholders: Parents, Grade 8 students and Grade 8 teachers		Stakeholders: Receiving schools, new Grade 9 students, Grade 9 school staff and parents		Stakeholders: Grade 9 students, school staff, parents
Goal: Parents and students make an informed decision chooisng select schools		Goal: Student orientation, school welcoming activities; staff professional development		Goal: Year long student academic and social support; year long parental communication

Figure 5.2: School of choice framework.

Since the NCLB requirements of 2001, school choice programs have evolved.

The researcher has presented a more holistic school of choice process that is designed to

give more direct benefits to students and a school community. Research suggests the importance of student access to teachers and academic programs in an equitable manner (Robert, 2010). School of choice can provide this equity for students and parents . Consideration must be given to ensure that the school of choice process does not exclude students due to inadequate communication. This study presented the fact that 130 students needed a ninth grade school assignment, yet did not participate in the process. These students, who did not participate in a school choice program, were at a greater disadvantage prior to the beginning of an important transitional year. Connections to possible schools were not made for these students. Perhaps there was a lack of understanding of the importance and benefits of a school selection for the parent and child. Maybe the parent did not have access to the information. Students might have felt unable to make such decisions without support. Students may have felt that choices would not be honored. Further research on the effects on those students who do not participate in a school choice program is needed.

Local, state and federal policy. Given the decline in GPA during the ninth grade, a school of choice process can be a preventive tool at the ninth grade level. Interest can be an important element in a student's academic life and Deci and Ryan (2008) support interest as being an important component of motivation and choice. Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, and Sanchez (2000) discuss the importance of social and academic support for students as factors to maintain school connection. Local, federal and state policies need to evaluate current school of choice programs. The present study suggests that student participation alone cannot be indicators of measurement for school of choice programs. Policies must consider how a school of choice process can impact student achievement. Local and State policies need to evaluate how the school of choice

process impacts all stakeholders in the process including, students, parents and schools. Measurement of student success needs to go beyond standardized test scores as federal policy requires. School districts need to be able to demonstrate the positive effect a school of choice program has on students' academic outcome. School superintendents need to be cognizant of the potential a well-developed school of choice process can have on student attendance. Measurements of schools of choice need to include evidence of district and school transitional support systems, impact on student achievement and the benefit of a process on all stakeholders.

Research. Implications of the findings of this study suggest the need to further examine how school choice programs affect those students who do not participate in the school of choice process. It would be beneficial to investigate if students who do not participate in a school of choice process have further difficulties entering the ninth grade than those students who do participate. There is also a need to define how many options are significant choices for students. The process in UCSD required students to rank eight choice schools. The study findings suggested that for students beyond the third choice, there was not an effect to the choice. School districts would benefit from knowing the validity of choice in the number of ranked schools. Further research is needed regarding the effects of the number of ranked choices. Furthermore, consideration needs to be given to what should occur when a school district cannot honor the top three school choices for a student. It is also important to further understand when the role of choice becomes insignificant for a student choosing schools.

Conclusion

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2005), 83% of Americans believe there is an urgent need to improve the nation's high schools. Only two-thirds of

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American teenagers, and only half of all African Americans, Latino and Native American teens, graduate with a regular diploma four years after they enter high school (Hebert, 2005). Research has demonstrated that ninth grade is a pivotal year for secondary school success or failure (Reinhard, 1997).

Ninth grade achievement is pivotal for the success of a student to graduate and avoid dropping out of school. Students are transitioned as ninth graders into schools not of their choosing or assigned to neighborhood schools. While there is extensive research on ninth grade achievement, dropout risk factors and student motivation, there is a gap in the literature in how school selection plays a role in ninth grade academic achievement.

The purpose of this study was to explore how choice, in the selection of schools, contributed to ninth grade achievement in UCSD, an urban district. The study investigated 391 ninth grade students and sought to investigate how choice played a role in increased attendance, increased grade point average and credits earned at the end of the ninth grade.

Ninth grade students who participated in the school selection process and received their school choice selection placements were compared in the areas of grade point average, attendance and ninth grade credits earned. To support the grade point average analysis, report cards for each marking period were analyzed. The analysis included the demographic information of each student. An analysis among choice placements was completed in the mentioned areas: students who were placed in their first school selection choice were compared to students placed in their third school selection choice and students placed in their fifth through eighth school selections. The information compiled and the analysis conducted determined if choice played a role with ninth grade academic achievement, attendance and credits earned.

Further, this study included three major areas for urban ninth graders in the selected school district. First, urban ninth graders who participated in selecting their ninth grade school had better attendance than the district attendance average. Second, urban ninth graders, who participated in the school selection process and placed in their choice school, did not have a significant higher grade point average. Third, urban ninth graders who participated in the school selection process and placed in their choice school did not earn more credits than their peers.

The findings of this study support and contribute to research that indicates the importance of ninth grade and the academic failure during this pivotal year (Hebert, 2005; Reinhard, 1997; Wagner, 1989; Zvoch, 2006). According to research, risk factors contributing to high school dropout rates include feeling connected to school (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). Students who attend school regularly are most likely to show motivation and feel empowered (Brooks & Young, 2001). Students who have choice are likely to be more motivated than their peers (Deci, 2008)

Loyd (2005) investigated how choice increased students' perceived satisfaction in four psychological needs: belonging, power, freedom and fun. Loyd's findings match the findings of this study. Students placed in their first choice school had a higher attendance rare than other students. These findings are consistent with research asserting Choice Theory (Loyd, 2005) and the Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The correlation of choice and attendance supports current research. These findings have implications for schools. School administrators, teachers and staff must consider connecting with incoming ninth graders as a priority and must evaluate all policies with regard to attendance. School practices must ensure that attendance policies are not punitive, but supportive in maintaining connections with school. Non-academic factors become important contributors to student

engagement in the ninth grade, a pivotal year to preventing dropping out of school. Choice supports empowerment, but when school protocols do not support student empowerment, disengagement can occur. Association between expectations and academic success are foreseeable as attendance has a direct impact on academic achievement (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007).

Though significance could not be found in the role choice played with school selection and increased grade point average, results of the study are consistent with research and ninth grade achievement. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) report that ninth grade continues to be a pivotal and important year for students, yet students struggle academically, especially urban ninth grade students. Students in all choice groups in the study demonstrated a decline in the grade point average from the first marking period to the final grade point average.

The dissertation findings, with credits earned at the end of ninth grade, have implications for schools to monitor urban ninth grade student schedules to ensure that assigned courses enable a student to reach graduation in four years. Further studies are needed to determine the benefits of school choice programs and to seek ways to make the process comprehensive. The school of choice process should be more than a system to place students. A school of choice process should be viewed as a holistic framework process which begins at the time the student makes a choice and is placed at a school and is complete at the end of the specific transitional year at the new school.

In conclusion, investigations to improve ninth grade achievement and the role choice plays in this improvement continue to be relevant and necessary. Ninth grade is an important year. School districts must find ways to validate student and school connection to prevent students from dropping out of school. Policies impacting ninth

grade achievement must be evaluated to ensure student support. School selection

programs must be evaluated as to their effect on student achievement or dropout

prevention. Based on the dissertation findings, choice has an impact on attendance, but

after the choice has been made there is a need to know how student outcomes are

positively impacted by this choice.

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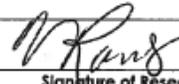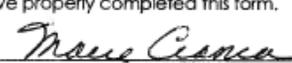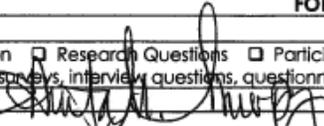
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Appendix A

District Research Permission Form

INSTRUCTIONS

The application should be typed or clearly printed in black ink. **Applications must have a brief summary of the study including: the research question(s), a description of the participants, a brief description of research methodology with copies of any and all instruments to be used (e.g., surveys, interview questions, questionnaires, checklists, observation sheets, psychometric assessments, etc.) attached, and a timeline.** Completed applications (original copy) will be reviewed within approximately 14 days of submission, the second level review (see page 2) conducted, and a decision rendered within 30 days of the request if all documentation is provided (depending on the nature of the request, some may take longer). Incomplete requests will be returned, without review, to the researcher for completion. Researchers will be notified by letter of approval or denial if it is determined that the research project does not meet district standards or protocols.

Under some circumstances, protocols may be approved contingent upon the provision of additional information ("approval pending" status). Under these circumstances, the additional information must be provided before approval will be given and data are collected.

All completed research applications for review must be forwarded to:

For any applications that are denied, an appeal letter (with the original application) must be forwarded to:

I. General Information:		II. School Information (FOR STUDENTS ONLY) (If you are not a student please continue to section III)		
Researcher's Name:	Vicma Ramos	School/College:	St John Fisher	
Researcher's Address:		Department/Program	☐ Art/Humanities ☐ Business ☑ Education ☐ Math ☐ Science ☑ Other L	
Researcher's Email:		*Signature of Researcher* V. Rams	9/22/12 Date
Current Date:	9/21/12			
Proposed Start Date of Research:	1/2013	Faculty Supervisor's Name:	Marie Cianca	
Proposed Completion Date of Research:	4/2013	Faculty Supervisor's Email:	mcianca @ sjfc.edu	
Title of Research Project:		In the case of student research, the application should be reviewed and signed by the faculty supervisor. It is the responsibility of the faculty supervisor to ensure that students have properly completed this form.		
Note: Researcher agrees to provide an electronic copy of the completed thesis or dissertation.		*Marie Cianca* Signature of Faculty Supervisor	9/22/12 Date

III. Required Attachments

1. Research involves	☑ Students	☐ Parents	☐ Staff	☐ Teachers/Administrators
2. Please attach research questions	N/A			
3. Attach brief description of research methodology				

FOR INTERNAL OFFICE USE (ONLY)

Checklist:
☐ Application ☐ Research Questions ☐ Participant Description ☐ Description of research methodology
☐ Copies of surveys, interview questions, questionnaires, etc. (If Applicable)
☑ Approved ☐ Denied Reason(s) for Denial:

Appendix B

From: Mosca, Jamie
Sent: Tuesday, November 27, 2012 10:09 AM
To: Ramos, Vicma I
Cc: Cianca, Marie
Subject: IRB Approval

Dear Ms. Ramos:

Thank you for submitting your research proposal to the Institutional Review Board.

I am pleased to inform you that the Board has approved the proposal entitled, "Does choice in school selection contribute to ninth grade academic achievement?"

Following federal guidelines, research related records should be maintained in a secure area for three years following the completion of the project at which time they may be destroyed.

Should you have any questions about this process or your responsibilities, please contact me at 385-5262 or by e-mail to emerges@sjfc.edu.

Sincerely,

Eileen M. Merges, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board