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# Promoting Student Success: A Program Evaluation of A Ninth Grade Transition Program

Micah Lonae Smith

College of William and Mary - School of Education, mlonae0421@gmail.com

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PROMOTING STUDENT SUCCESS:  
A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF A NINTH GRADE TRANSITION PROGRAM

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

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In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

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by  
Micah Lonae Smith  
November 2017

PROMOTING STUDENT SUCCESS:  
A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF A NINTH GRADE TRANSITION PROGRAM

by

Micah Lona Smith

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Approved December 2017 by

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**Megan Tschannen-Moran, Ph.D.**  
**Chairperson of Doctoral Committee**

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**Leslie Grant, Ph.D.**

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**Kyung Hee Kim, Ph.D.**

## **Dedication**

First and foremost, I would like to give honor to God for watching over me and giving me the strength and determination to complete this process. There were some difficult days and nights, but through prayer and my faith, my God made it possible for me to finish my work.

To my husband, Schuyler, you are my rock. You have supported my journey since the beginning, and for that I am so grateful. You have encouraged me time and time again. You have always stood by my side and made sure I didn't give up on my dream. I love you so much for putting up with me throughout this entire process.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to evaluate the impact of Morrison High School's ninth grade transition program, the Freshman Academy, on student outcomes. Based on the outcomes, decisions will be made to determine if the Freshman Academy is meeting students' needs or if the program elements need to be revisited to improve student achievement.

Participants included teachers, school counselors, and administrators at Morrison High School in southeastern Virginia. The study employed the product component of the CIPP model of program evaluation to guide the data collection and to determine the merit, worth, and significance of the program. Quantitative data were collected using student outcome data based on GPA, attendance rates, number of discipline referrals, pass rates on Virginia Standards of Learning End of Course tests, and credits earned. Qualitative data were collected based on teacher, school counselor, and administrator interviews.

Successes and challenges of the program as well as areas of recommended improvement are detailed in this study. Analysis of student outcome data revealed that students participating in the program are consistently meeting the benchmark intended outcomes for attendance, discipline, and credits earned and most students are passing the Algebra I and World Geography SOLs during the last year included in this study. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of the program elements can only assist teams in providing stronger transition programs to help students achieve the intended outcomes.

Recommendations for future research and program improvement include collaboration between the Freshman Academy teachers and administrators with the

eighth grade teachers and administrators at the feeder middle schools, developing a summer bridge program to target at-risk students, and increasing parental involvement and seeking their feedback on the Freshman Academy.

PROMOTING STUDENT SUCCESS:  
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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Ensuring student success after high school has become more important than ever. The two most recent iterations of the Elementary and Secondary School Act, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB, 2001) and Every Student Succeeds Act of 2016 (ESSA, 2016), have changed the focus of how educators view student achievement. In preparing students to graduate from high school, teachers, school counselors, and administrators are held accountable for measures of student proficiency in reading and math. They are also held to account for student graduation rates within four years. Ultimately, the expected goal for all schools is to promote academic success and advance students from one grade level to the next by developing and implementing evidence-based strategies. High school leaders have a serious obligation to support the learning of all of their students; however, the responsibility of providing students with avenues for success begins with ninth graders.

Attending high school for the first time can be an exciting, yet difficult transition period for many students. Most United States high school students enter a school that is generally much larger than the middle school they attended. The transition from middle school to high school can be a time in a young person's life when many become overwhelmed by experiencing feelings of anxiety, isolation, disconnection, and an immeasurable sense of loneliness. Research shows this is particularly difficult for students living in urban and large metropolitan areas in the United States (Benner &



Graham, 2009; Legters & Kerr, 2001; Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Warren, Fazekas, Rennie-Hill, Fancsali, & Jaffe-Walters, 2011). It is this shift from middle school to high school that causes many students to struggle academically and fall behind, reducing the likelihood they will graduate from high school or graduate on time (Warren et al., 2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Most freshmen enter high school looking for some sort of support system to guide them over the next four years. Support systems for students may include their parents, teachers, school counselors, administrators, and their peers. Becker and Luthar (2002) found that dropout rates are directly related to students not having positive relationships with other students and staff members. Ninth grade has the highest enrollment among all grades in high school and also has some of the most concerning statistics. Ninth graders have been found to have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, the majority of failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than any other high school grade level (Fritzer & Herbst, 1996). Additionally, Dailey, Kemple and Cavanna (2006) cited several key problems in ninth grade that can be found in high schools across the United States:

Ninth grade can be large, anonymous, “chaotic” places for early adolescents; it may have low levels of literacy and basic math skills; it may consist of mixed expectations that promote and reinforce tracking; the ninth grade has limited capacity for teachers and staff to address diverse student needs; and there is a lack of relevance and connection to community, employers, and higher education. (p. 18)

It is for these reasons that high schools across the country have begun providing transition programs for their ninth grade students.

### **Reasons for Concern**

Research has demonstrated how numerous measures of student performance decline following the transition into high school (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). The ninth grade year is where students tend to have lower attendance rates than students in other grade levels, and that attendance is a predictor of academic performance (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Moreover, about 30% of students nationwide, fail one or more classes in the ninth-grade. Further, the ninth grade students in their study had the highest number of discipline incidents. Finally, ninth graders who repeated the grade were found to be at greater risk of dropping out of high school and only 10-15% ever graduated.

Researchers have found that freshman retention, attendance, discipline problems, core class failures, and failures from mandated state assessments are issues plaguing many school systems in the U.S. (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). Because ninth graders are three to five times more likely to fail a class than students in any other grade, researchers have suggested that schools should support the transition to ninth grade (Bottoms, 2008; Gibson, 2006; Habeeb, 2013; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Uvaas & McKeivitt, 2013).

U.S. high schools have long been aware of the anxiety and confusion associated with starting ninth grade (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Neild, 2009). The failure rate for students in ninth grade remains higher than any other grade level (Bottoms, 2008; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). In a study of one cohort of entering ninth graders in Chicago Public Schools, Roderick and Camburn (1999) found that over 40% of students failed one or more major subjects during the first semester of high school. There are a number of

potential reasons for this. High school students typically have more assignments than students were used to in middle school. There can be also more distractions due to the increasing complexity in peer relations. Finally, their overall participation in school may decline after their transition to high school (Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman, & Smith, 2000). Students perceived similar concerns. They conveyed a decrease in perceived support from teachers every year after Grade 6. Ninth graders also reported being less involved in school activities and feeling the need for more school organization (Barber & Olsen, 2004).

Academic failure during the transition to high school has been directly linked to the probability of dropping out (Legters & Kerr, 2001). In addition, Habeeb (2013) noted that ninth grade students in general, must make decisions with long-term consequences, but they often lack the maturity and foresight to make those decisions well. Neild (2009) examined four theories about why ninth grade can be difficult for some students:

1. Ninth grade coincides with life-course changes, such as reduced parental supervision and increased peer influence.
2. Students have to attend a new school and must break the bonds they have formed with their middle-school teachers and peers.
3. Some students are inadequately prepared for high school.
4. The organization of some high schools is itself a major source of students' difficulty.

During this time in their lives, ninth graders are exploring who they are and who they hope to become. When students are able to cope well with school transitions they are able to sustain high levels of academic motivation, knowledge, and skills that are

necessary for their progression toward college or the workplace (Newman et al., 2000). Given these and related factors, transition to high school is an important issue for educators to examine to improve student academic performance and foster a positive high school experience for students.

### **Transition to High School**

Schools need to provide a smooth transition to help students cope with some of their developmental issues, feel supported, and, ultimately, be successful in high school. School transitions can be developmentally disruptive for students as a result of the mismatch between their stage of development and the demands of the school environment (Benner & Graham, 2009; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) noted several developmental changes and challenges students face in ninth grade including skills needed to think and solve problems, concerns about physical and sexual changes, and making and keeping friends. The school environment frequently increases adolescents' concerns. Therefore, an effective transition process must be sensitive to these changes and support students and parents as they deal with them

Transition support efforts seek to change the experience of ninth grade for all incoming students. These efforts combine environmental changes to make the school more welcoming and responsive with academic changes to improve the quality of instruction and increase students' academic achievement (Warren et al., 2011). In a study of schools that included Smaller Learning Communities (SLCs), the majority of schools had not implemented a comprehensive, systematic response to the challenge of helping students move into high school successfully (Warren et al., 2011). However, many of the SLCs did focus on a number of promising strategies that provided some student success.

Many schools' emphasis on ninth grade transition involves mostly tinkering around the edges, focusing on isolated activities or programs (Donegan, 2008). Schools seem to design their freshman transition programs as a series of events rather than a process that they must maintain before, during, and after the ninth grade year. Research suggests that high schools need to have full, comprehensive transition programs where ninth graders receive continuous focus on academics, strategies, and personalized support (Warren et al., 2011).

Reform efforts have tended to address high school organization, with or without a focus on instructional quality or helping students to catch up on academic skills. Neild (2009) noted that school districts and state departments of education also are addressing the problem by creating accountability indicators of how well high schools are keeping ninth graders on track. States are helping districts to develop their capacity to maintain and analyze data on ninth-grade progress, including "early warning indicator systems" that identify students who are falling off track to graduation. One study found that compared the outcomes of middle school transitional programs, students who had access to a transitional program in middle school had an average grade point average (GPA) of 2.43 in high school, while those students who did not have a transitional program in place in their middle school had an average GPA of 2.0 (Smith, 1997). Kerr (2002) recommended that schools implement a variety of programs to target areas of concern in order to prevent failures, alleviate student fears regarding high school, and promote student achievement.

## **Morrison High School Freshman Academy Program Description**

Morrison High School, a comprehensive high school in the southeastern region of Virginia, has made a concerted effort to ensure a successful transition for students from middle to high school by implementing a freshman transition program. The goal of the Freshman Academy is to ensure that first-time ninth grade students who have struggled in middle school experience both academic and behavioral success throughout their high school experience. Since 2009, approximately 420 students have been identified to participate in the program prior to coming to high school based on having low grades in Language Arts and/or math; having five or more absences during a marking period; having three or more discipline referrals; and having low SOL performance in reading, math, or science in the ranges of 350-374. The Standards of Learning (SOL) is a standardized testing program administered in the state of Virginia. These standards establish the minimum expectations for student learning in Virginia's Public Schools K-12 core classes (VDOE, 2016).

### **Ninth Grade Academy Logic Model**

A logic model provides a clear and practical layout of how a program will work under certain conditions to solve identified problems (Bickman, 1987, as cited in McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999). Some of the benefits of using the logic model tool identified by McLaughlin and Jordan (1999) include that it builds a common understanding of the program and expectations, it is helpful for program design or improvement, identifying projects that are critical to goal attainment, redundant, or have inconsistent or implausible linkages among program elements, and it points to key

performance measurement points and evaluation issues, thus improves data collection and usefulness.

The Morrison High School Freshman Academy was designed to capture and monitor ninth grade experiences and successes. Its elements are described in the logic model in Figure 1.

<b>INPUTS</b>	<b>PROGRAM ELEMENTS</b>	<b>INTENDED OUTCOMES</b>
<b>Staff, Time, Students, Money</b>	<b>Activities and Participation</b>	<b>9th Grade Successes</b>
Teachers	Double-block classes	Students have a GPA of at least 2.0
Administrators	Peer tutoring	Students have 90% attendance or higher
School Counselors	Homework Club	
Graduation Coach	Dream Girls/Men on the Move	Students have fewer than 3 discipline referrals
<b>Time</b>		
Common course preps	Town Hall meetings	Students pass SOL assessments
Planning	IOU Café	
Smaller class sizes	FLEX	Students earn at least 5 units of credit
<b>Students</b>		
Juniors	Grade Recovery	Students are on track for graduation
Seniors		
<b>Money</b>		
Budget		
Teacher allocations		

Figure 1. A logic model of ninth grade transition.

**Program Inputs**

Morrison High School has invested in staff members and students to assist with the academic transition of its ninth grade students through the Freshman Academy. The Freshman Academy is staffed by three core English, math, science, and social studies

teachers, including a freshman lead teacher. There are three school counselors who each have ninth graders as part of their caseload. There is one administrator, a freshman lead teacher, and a graduation coach who work specifically with ninth graders. The teachers are provided with common planning time as part of their daily schedule. They are also provided with professional development at least four times throughout the school year. Habeeb (2013) noted that schools should ensure that the teachers of freshmen grow professionally and use the latest research-based strategies in pedagogy and technology. Ninth grade teachers are provided with professional development that addresses the needs of the ninth grader and how to address them. Professional development workshops are provided by the ninth grade administrator, freshman lead teacher, and various teachers and school counselors. Some of the topics include student interventions, flexible learning environments, academic rigor, and parental involvement. All teachers have laptops and a SMART Board in their classroom. They are equipped with technology tools to help them plan and provide for high-quality instruction.

During their common planning time, Freshman Academy teachers discuss students' progress to include grades, attendance, and discipline. Hertzog and Morgan (1997) found that transition programs had the most impact on students when middle and high school teachers and administrators organized a "transition team" that meets monthly to plan and conduct transition activities for the school year. All ninth grade teachers at Morrison meet once a month after school with the freshman lead teacher to discuss strategies for ninth grade success, concerns they may have, or to discuss a book they are reading to help them improve as ninth grade teachers. As a ninth grade lead team, the teachers, school counselors, graduation coach, and administrator meet once a month to



discuss the overall progress of the ninth grade students and plan the activities throughout the year. Expectations for students should be standardized so they know what expectations teachers have for them and can create classroom cultures where excellence occurs (Habeb, 2013). The ninth grade team promotes consistency regarding ninth grade students. Teachers, school counselors, ninth grade administrator, and the graduation coach believe that consistency in the way they approach all students is important, but even more critical for the achievement of the ninth grade student.

Junior and senior students who have a GPA of 2.8 or higher, have missed no more than one day of school per semester, have no discipline referrals, and have passed all of their SOL assessments when school begins in September are provided with an opportunity to volunteer to work with ninth grade students after school. In particular, teachers recommend juniors and seniors to work with the students in the Freshman Academy. The ninth grade administrator and freshman lead teacher select at least 10 juniors and seniors to work with the students in the Freshman Academy.

During the summer, the Freshman Academy lead team reviews data on the incoming freshmen to include grades, attendance, discipline, and SOL scores. This information is used to determine the appropriate course placement for each student. The students participating in the Freshman Academy are enrolled in double-block English, or regular ninth grade English, a Biology or Earth Science core or elective class, World Geography, double-block Algebra, health and P.E., and another elective of their choice if enrolled in a regular ninth grade English class. Class sizes for students in the Freshman Academy have a maximum of 20 students as compared to the average ninth grade class of 25-28 students.

## **Program Elements**

Morrison High School implemented several strategies as part of its freshman transition program to ease the move from middle to high school, alleviate many of the students' concerns, and promote an overall positive experience. These strategies were particularly designed and implemented to increase promotion, attendance, and SOL performance, and to decrease discipline referrals. The Freshman Academy included the following strategies:

1. Double-block classes: Students who need additional support in English and/or math are placed in classes that meet every day. Placement is based on either the Grade 8 SOL performance in English and math or on the Grade 8 Diagnostic Online Reading Assessment (DORA). Students receive two credits based on successful completion of the course.
2. Peer tutoring: Ninth grade students are assigned to upperclassmen (eleventh and twelfth grade students) to receive tutoring. Ninth grade students are identified to receive tutoring after the first Interim period.
3. Homework Club: All ninth grade students are invited to attend after school tutorial sessions with their teachers on Tuesdays and/or Thursdays. Students are expected to sign up to receive additional support.
4. Dream Girls/Men on the Move: Once a month, students are invited to attend mentorship meetings (at the school or on a field trip) where they listen to a guest speaker, engage in activities that promote leadership skills or relationships, and are served a light lunch. Staff members and upperclassmen

serve as mentors to students who are struggling academically, socially, and/or behaviorally.

5. Town Hall meetings: Each quarter, all ninth grade students attend a meeting where they receive an overview of ninth grade expectations; data for overall performance in English, math, science, and social studies classes; attendance; and discipline referrals. Students also hear from a number of speakers including their grade-level administrator, class sponsor, school counselors and the graduation coach. This helps to keep them abreast of critical information and provides support for the students' academic and behavioral needs.
6. IOU Café: Students are provided with an opportunity to make up assignments twice a month. A list of students who have missing work is sent to the freshman lead teacher and the ninth grade graduation coach. A list of missing assignments is compiled and passes are provided to the students to make up work during an elective class. Completed assignments are submitted to the corresponding teacher and students receive a certain percentage of credit for their completed work.
7. FLEX: Students are provided with a pass twice a month to receive additional remediation in a subject or time to make up assignments or a test. FLEX always occurs during first period on a Friday.
8. Grade Recovery: Students are provided with an opportunity to recover their grade in either English, Biology, or Algebra I. Students are identified based on their first marking period grade of "F" in one or more subjects. Teachers are identified to teach the recovery sessions after school. Students must attend 5

out of the 6 sessions and complete 80% of the assignments to receive a passing grade.

It is critical to evaluate the program's effectiveness to determine the best way to meet the academic and behavioral needs of freshmen. This program evaluation extends the existing body of knowledge on the effectiveness of a ninth grade transition program, the Freshman Academy, by examining the results of its intervention efforts. Other high schools that are experiencing high numbers of freshmen failure, retention, and dropout may consider the results of this study in planning their own transition efforts.

### **Intended Program Outcomes**

The Freshman Academy was designed to help at-risk ninth grade students be successful throughout high school. The program focuses on helping students achieve a GPA of at least a 2.0 by the end of the school year; attend school at least 90% of the time throughout the school year; receive less than three discipline referrals by the end of the year; pass all of their SOL assessments; and earn at least 5 credits. Each outcome, a high-yield indicator, is critical to the overall success of each student in the Freshman Academy. The ninth grade administrator and freshman lead teacher observe classes and meet with the students and teachers to discuss student progress. Meetings are also held each quarter with the parents of the students in the Freshman Academy to keep them abreast of their student's progress and keep them involved. The Freshman Academy administrator, freshman lead teacher, and graduation coach maintain data that includes the progress reports on each student throughout the year. Progress reports are used to monitor students' grades, attendance, and discipline.

During May, the Freshman Academy administrator and freshman lead teacher monitor the SOL performance of the students in the Freshman Academy. Some students will score in the expedited range of 375-399 and will need to retake their SOL in June during the expedited retake window. These students will attend remediation to address categories and/or skills in which they are deficient. Once the testing administration is complete, the administrator, lead teacher, school counselors, and graduation coach meet to discuss next steps for students who did not pass their SOL. All students are encouraged to attend summer school remediation to be able to retake the SOL before school begins in the fall. Students receive a summer remediation letter that explains the test (s) and the process for registration. One of the goals is to be sure students are on the right track toward graduation by completing the required amount of verified credits from passing SOL assessments.

### **Evaluation Questions**

The three evaluation questions below guide the evaluation of the Freshman Academy program. Each evaluation question is designed as an indicator that will seek to determine the efficacy of the implementation of the Freshman Academy. This formative program evaluation will answer the following questions pertaining to the Freshman Academy:

1. How are students in the Freshman Academy performing according to the benchmark intended outcomes of a GPA of at least 2.0, 90% attendance or higher, fewer than three discipline referrals, passing scores on the Algebra I, Biology or Earth Science, and World Geography EOC assessments, and the completion of at least five standard units of credit?

2. Is there a statistically significant difference between the proportion of Freshman Academy students and non-Academy ninth grader students in terms benchmark intended outcomes, including GPA of at least 2.0, 90% attendance or higher, fewer than three discipline referrals, passing scores on the Algebra I, Biology or Earth Science, and World Geography EOC assessments, and the completion of at least five standard units of credit?

3. What are the perceptions of teachers, school counselors, and administrators regarding the influence of the transition program on students' GPA, attendance, discipline, SOL scores, and credits earned?

### **Significance of the Study**

Educators have recognized the need to provide academic support and enrichment to improve ninth grade attendance, classroom behavior, social skills and overall academic performance. Multiple strategies are necessary to address transition issues (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Smith, 1997). Through continued research that specifically addresses successful strategies, it will be possible to increase awareness for educators and lessen the difficulties that students have during the transition process.

Previous research has captured students' and teachers' perceptions related to ninth grade transition programs (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Benner & Graham, 2009; Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Gibson, 2006; Kerr, 2002). These perceptions were used to develop transition programs, but they did not include perceptions of how the transition programs improved educational outcomes of students. This current study will examine indicators of students' success as well as offer a qualitative component that was not presented in extant transition research. Teacher, school counselor and administrator perceptions were limited

in previous research. The viewpoints of teachers, school counselors, and administrators will make up the qualitative data of this study.

### **Definitions of Terms**

The following terms and definitions are listed to provide uniformity of understanding and meaning in this study.

**Academic transition:** “a process during which institutional and social factors influence which students’ educational careers are positively or negatively affected by this movement between organizations” (Schiller, 1999, p. 216).

**Comprehensive high school:** a high school that serves the needs of all its students, including the offer of advanced courses and magnet programs (Newport News Public Schools, 2014).

**Double dosing:** catch-up courses in math and reading are offered, using the block schedule, so that ninth graders can then complete freshman English and Algebra I in the second semester of freshman year (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

**High-yield indicators:** measures that are strong early warning signs displayed in the first year of high school that predict whether students will graduate or dropout; that is, grades, standardized test scores, and so forth. (Heppen & Therriault, 2009).

**Intervention:** a new strategy for instruction, system organization, or behavior modification intended to help a student or a group of students improve performance (Howell, Patton & Deiotte, 2008).

**Smaller learning communities (SLCs):** A team of teachers work together in smaller learning units to provide instruction, closely monitor students’ academic progress, and improve instruction as needed (Warren et al., 2011).

**Transition programs:** programs designed to help students have a smoother transition from middle school into high school (Wilder, 2008).



## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of Literature**

Ninth grade is a time when students are often faced with challenges and obstacles, but it is also a time that is critical to student success. Ninth grade provides the foundation for how well students will perform in subsequent grades. Warren et al. (2011) noted the importance of the ninth grade year for students:

The ninth grade both reflects and reinforces the values that shaped the modern American high school. The effort to reshape the ninth grade, as part of a larger effort to transform secondary education, thus challenges deeply held assumptions about what high schools are supposed to do as well as how they function. (p. 5)

Educators and policymakers play a critical role in ensuring that all students graduate from high school on time. When students do not complete high school, they have little chance of sustaining themselves or a family in today's economy (Turner, 2007). Schools that have a fully operational transition program have an average dropout rate of 8% compared to schools that do not have a transition program, which have an average dropout rate of 24% (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). The purpose of this chapter is to examine available literature regarding the components of effective ninth grade transition programs to include providing information, supporting social success, addressing academic preparation, and collaboration among stakeholder groups (Bottoms, 2008).

## **Components of Effective Transition Programs**

Transition is considered a process that includes multiple activities throughout the year to promote student success. A quality high school transition program has a number of components that would help not only ease student anxiety about attending high school, but also prepare students with a strong foundation for academic success. Teachers, school counselors, and administrators play an important role in creating a positive impression for ninth graders even before they begin high school. Specific and targeted activities at the high school can have an impact that helps yield success over the next four years.

The most effective transition programs are comprehensive. They involve continuous planning among teams of teachers and school leaders; they target activities to students, parents, and teachers; and they attend to students who are likely to have difficulty with achievement, behavior problems, and low socioeconomic status (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000). MacIver (1990) noted that if a school has a large number of poor or at-risk students, then typically fewer transition activities exist. The Freshman Academy bucks that trend. It is a comprehensive transition program where the transition team, including teachers, the ninth grade administrator, and freshman lead teacher meet and plan regularly to provide a structured program for students including a number of sessions to introduce students and parents to the school. It offers opportunities for students and parents to meet and become familiar with school staff. The Freshman Academy arranges a number of opportunities to participate in mentorship activities throughout the year such as Dream Girls and Men on the Move; and provides continuous monitoring of student progress throughout the year.

## **Providing Information**

**Starting in middle school.** A successful transition program begins while students are still in middle school. Middle school students are curious about high school. They want to know the answers to their questions about specific information that will affect them. They want to know who their teachers are going to be. They want to know about their classes. They want to know where their locker will be located. Students also want to know if they will make new friends when they get to high school. Providing students and parents the answers to these and many other questions should be a central component of a high school transition program (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Research shows it is important for the transition team to communicate information about its building, programs, services, policies, and expectations to the incoming students and their parents (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2008; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Specific feedback about the effectiveness of programs needs to be shared among the stakeholders and with parents as well. Mac Iver and Epstein (1991) examined middle school transition programs and student services. They established that the three most common transition approaches for students included touring a new school; having educators from both middle and high school to meet; and having counselors in the new school to meet with staff in the old school.

The Freshman Academy includes two of the three common transition approaches examined in the research. Incoming eighth graders tour Morrison High School the spring before they will enroll. This visit provides students with a visual of what high school looks like. School counselors from Morrison coordinate the visit with the feeder middle schools. Feeder middle schools are the schools where students are zoned to attend a particular high school. Morrison has three feeder middle schools. During the middle school visit, students listen to a presentation that includes expectations such as courses

and a typical schedule, and extracurricular activities such as clubs and sports. After the presentation, students take a tour of Morrison. Hertzog and Morgan (1997) noted that transition programs had the most impact on students when middle and high schools coordinated an eighth-grade student field trip to the high school to include a building tour, an overview of courses, and a snapshot of what high school can look like.

The school counselors at Morrison visit the middle schools to discuss high school expectations including curriculum, courses, exams, graduation requirements, block scheduling, lunch periods, class changes, and clubs and activities. Communication between the school levels helps to prepare students and alleviate any concerns they may have. Hertzog and Morgan (1997) found that transition programs had the most impact on students when high school counselors met with eighth grade students to discuss high school expectations such as courses and schedules.

The educators from the four feeder middle schools and Morrison do not meet to discuss and plan for students' transition to high school. This could prove to be beneficial in preparing ninth graders for the upcoming school year, however. Middle and high school teachers could benefit from planning vertically to provide a seamless transition for the ninth grade students.

Hertzog and Morgan (1997) suggested that high schools establish an adviser/advisee program where ninth grade students act as advisers for eighth grade students to discuss "life in high school," the curriculum, scheduling, and registration. This is a component that is lacking in the Freshman Academy. Ninth graders can provide a critical voice for what eighth graders can expect based on real-life experiences in high

school. Students want to hear from other students. This is an opportunity that the Freshman Academy will need to explore.

Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) indicated from their study of 495 freshmen that new ninth graders needed to know more about their classes and directions for finding their way through the building, and locating classes in a new setting. The Freshman Academy provides rising ninth graders with three opportunities to visit Morrison High School to find out more about the building, teachers and their classes, and meet their school counselors and administrators. During the spring, eighth grade students and their teachers visit Morrison for an overview of their classes and a tour of the school. Hertzog and Morgan (1997) also found that transition programs had the most impact on students when schools held a “parent night” to discuss courses, school registration, scheduling, special summer programs, and academic preparation. Rising ninth grade students and the parents are invited to attend Freshman Welcome Night at Morrison to participate in a variety of sessions that provide them with schedule information, clubs and activities, program offerings, and a tour of the school. Each year in August, all freshman and their parents are invited to attend student orientation. Students attend an opening session in the school auditorium where they meet the teachers and administrators, watch and listen to the band and cheerleaders, watch a welcome presentation from the school district’s superintendent, and are given a copy of their schedule, so they can attend classes for 15 minutes each. These opportunities are provided to set students up with early success in high school.

**Understanding student concerns about high school.** Research regarding students’ perception about high school transition is limited; however, Letrello and Miles (2003) conducted individual interviews of six ninth grade special education and six ninth

grade non-special education students about their transition to high school in a suburban school district. The researchers analyzed the data for emerging themes or concepts and found that both groups, as eighth graders, expressed they were fearful of high school, especially of the size of the school, of older students, of not having enough friends, and of not being able to find all their classes. Both groups expected that high school would be “hard,” that they would not see their friends, they would have difficult classes, they would have difficult and demanding teachers, and that high school students would be more mature than those in middle school.

Once in high school, the students described their high school as being bigger, that they had more freedom in high school, that they participated in more extracurricular activities, and that high school students were more accepting of student differences. The students said that the most difficult aspects of moving to high school included getting accustomed to the block schedule, high expectations of the teachers, managing time, and lack of time for social activities because of the demands of homework. Students with learning disabilities indicated that they relied more heavily on help from peers and teachers to be successful in the ninth grade year than did students without learning disabilities. Students in both groups found it easy to make friends, get involved in extracurricular activities, and have more fun and freedom. Both groups of students stated that talking to their academic counselors and friends helped them get acquainted with the high school. Some of the advice that the students in both groups provided to future ninth graders included using good study habits, getting involved in extracurricular activities, completing homework, and being prepared to meet new and different people. Interviews

with both groups of students revealed that social interaction, particularly with peers, was important for them during their transition to high school.

Smith, Akos, Lim, and Wiley (2008) conducted a study of 172 students who transitioned from two middle schools (Grades 6-8) to a Freshmen Center (ninth grade only) in a large public school district in the Midwest. Pre- and post-transition surveys were administered. Of the 172 students, 119 completed the post-transition survey in the ninth grade measuring students' feelings about academic, social, and organizational aspects of high school. Each item was scored on a 4-point Likert response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The researchers found that students had a significantly more positive outlook on "freedom to choose academic plan" and "freedom to choose some classes." Students also expressed they "worried about having too much homework," "having difficult teachers," and "getting good grades." Based on the social subscale, students expressed concerns about "being around more students," "being around older students," "being bullied," "not fitting in," "not feeling safe," "peer pressure to do things I don't want to," and "not feeling accepted by other students." Students looked forward to being in a large school and having more choices for lunch, but expressed concern about getting lost and finding their way around school.

Student concerns regarding ninth grade transition is an area of research that continues to be investigated. Research regarding the role student concerns play in ninth grade transition and effective school programs is limited. Letrello and Miles (2003) suggested that student concerns about school transitions and how transitions affect school performance is an important first step in developing an effective transition program. Student concerns are an area that the Freshman Academy touches on, but has not yet

explored in depth. It may be beneficial to provide students with an opportunity to give feedback about the Freshman Academy throughout the course of their ninth grade year, especially before they are promoted to tenth grade. The information that students can share regarding their transition to high school and if they believe the Freshman Academy is helpful to them can be used to make adjustments to only improve the components of the program.

### **Supporting Social Success**

**School Connectedness.** Researchers have suggested the more students feel connected to their teachers, peers, and school environment, the greater their chances of success (Mac Iver, 1990; Kerr, 2002; Blum, 2005; Bottoms, 2008; Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). Blum (2005) described school connectedness as the following: “an academic environment in which students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals” (p. 16).

Habeeb (2013) specifically established from working with schools across the country that high schools should provide a more nurturing environment where it is difficult for students to slip through the cracks and provide support services for students who fall behind. School counselors at Morrison provide classroom visits each quarter to provide insight about various topics such as graduation requirements, transcripts, standardized testing (SOL and PSAT), organizational and time management skills, and evening workshops for parents. Students are also made aware that they can schedule a time to meet with their counselor at any time for additional support. Teachers, administrators, and graduation coaches are also available to meet with students and parents as needed.



Monitoring student progress is a priority for the staff at Morrison. High-yield indicators including grades, assessments, attendance, and behavior are monitored at various levels beginning with the teachers. If a student is not performing in the classroom at the expected level, teachers make sure to include the student and parent in the conversation to determine next steps for success. Teachers are required to maintain a contact log to have documentation that steps were taken to assist the student. The student's counselor and administrator may need to be included in the conversation as well. From this conversation, a success plan is created. The overall goal is to ensure that all students are progressing and graduating on time.

Benner and Graham (2009) examined the transition to high school as a developmental process and noted how much the respondents from an ethnically diverse sample of 1,979 students in Grades 7-10 liked school and how much they felt like they belonged. In their findings, students increased their school liking across middle school, and students reported liking school more than at the end of middle school. However, this positive trend of increased school liking did not continue across high school. Instead, school liking declined from fall of ninth to spring of 10th grade. Although school liking did decline across high school, it began to stabilize by 10th grade. Students' feelings of belonging increased across middle school. In contrast to school liking, students did not experience any change in their general feelings of school belonging immediately after the high school transition or across high school.

Based on data from a national survey of practices and trends in middle-grade education conducted by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools (CREMS), Mac Iver (1990) noted that as a result of having multiple

class changes and teachers, students may feel that their teachers and other school staff do not really know them, care about them, or are not available to assist them with problems they may have. For these reasons, student learning is likely to decrease and they may seek attention and rewards outside school.

Researchers continue to show three school characteristics that help young people feel connected to school while also encouraging student achievement (Blum, 2005; Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013):

1. high academic standards coupled with strong teacher support;
2. an environment in which adult and student relationships are positive and respectful; and
3. a physically and emotionally safe school environment.

In the age of accountability where there are mandates to increase standardized test performance and graduation rates, schools will need to include strategies to assist students and teachers with building relationships as part of the transition process. School connectedness can have a significant effect on the measures of student achievement for which schools are currently being held accountable (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013).

Connecting students to school is particularly important during the adolescent years. Blum (2005) found educators and school health professionals have increasingly identified school connectedness as an important factor in reducing the likelihood that adolescents will engage in health-compromising behaviors. Students are likely to succeed in a school environment where the adults care about them as individuals and care about their learning (Blum, 2005). Lastly, Uvaas and McKevitt (2013) recommended that school connectedness efforts should extend beyond the initial transition to high school. School

counselors and administrators can provide opportunities for students to become part of an advisory or mentorship group to help improve social and academic performance.

The Freshman Academy helps students to feel connected with their teachers, administrator, school counselor, and peers through their classes and various activities: a “schools within a school” approach. Double-block classes allow students to meet with their teachers every day and build relationships with them. Peer-tutoring provides students with an opportunity to work with upperclassmen who have already had the experience of being a ninth grader and can relate to some of the academic concerns and needs that students may have. Homework club is another opportunity for teachers to support students with their academic performance students are encouraged to stay after school for tutoring; however, teachers may make tutoring a requirement for students as needed. Dream Girls/Men on the Move mentorship help students to connect with their peers and teachers during engaging activities that help students focus on building leadership and relationship skills. Town hall meetings are led by students’ ninth grade peers and school staff and help students feel connected by keeping them informed of school related activities and events that pertain to just ninth graders. The IOU Café, FLEX, and grade recovery keeps students connected by providing them with opportunities for academic improvement. In addition to these program elements, the principal sends a weekly phone message to the homes of all students to keep them informed of upcoming school events, report cards, after school tutorials, and SOL testing.

Students should be equipped with belief systems they need to learn and succeed, recognized for their accomplishments, and made to feel welcomed and supported (Habeeb, 2013). Morrison High School believes that students are its number one priority.

Morrison's vision is stated on its website, proclaiming in part the intention "to empower students to reach their full potential through a safe and positive learning environment." School staff are focused on empowering students every day through daily announcements, recognitions at Town Hall meetings, acknowledgements in the classrooms and the cafeteria, and during after school and evening events. Another important example of recognizing and empowering students occurs during the Tenth Grade Promotion ceremony. The freshman lead teacher, ninth grade administrator and graduation coach provide a ceremony during the school day for those students who earn enough credits to become a tenth grader by the end of the first semester. Each student is called to come up to the front of the room to receive a certificate and an achievement pin that demonstrates their commitment to improving their achievement. These are just a few examples of how the staff at Morrison help students feel welcomed, supported, and connected to their school.

**Graduation coaches and mentors.** Graduation coaches and mentors are a critical component of the ninth grade transition program (Bottoms, 2008). A large part of their responsibility is meeting with students who are demonstrating disengagement from school. Ninth grade students may experience disengagement and will need to be provided with the support needed to keep them from dropping out (Anderson et al., 2000). Graduation coaches and mentors call parents and guardians when students are absent; they ensure students' work is meeting course standards; they connect students to extra help and, if necessary, to trained counselors for emotional, behavioral or social problems. Established relationships with a graduation coach or mentor can provide them with contact options when problems arise (Bottoms, 2008).

The Freshman Academy has one graduation coach who works with ninth grade students. As an important member of the ninth grade lead team, the graduation coach collects data on the ninth graders throughout the year. The graduation coach tracks and monitors the attendance, discipline, and academic progress of ninth grade students and keeps them on track through a variety of interventions including meeting with students; meeting with teachers, and meeting with parents. The graduation coach implements specific strategies for each student in developing a graduation and achievement plan to help students progress toward graduation. In essence, the graduation coach plays an integral role in helping ninth grade students feel connected. All adults who are part of the Freshman Academy serve as mentors to the 60 students in the program. Not one person is specifically assigned to students. This is an area that could be improved. Each student should be assigned a specific mentor as another way to support their success.

**School size.** The size of a classroom or school can influence student learning and experience (Alspaugh, 1998; Lee & Smith, 1993, 1995, 1997; Weiss & Bearman, 2007). The average Virginia high school has an enrollment of three hundred more students than the average Virginia middle school (NCES, 2002). This number is similar when comparing Virginia middle school enrollment to elementary school enrollment. Elementary schools in Virginia have an average enrollment of 482 students; middle schools have an average enrollment of 734 students; and high schools have an average enrollment of 1,057 students. When elementary students transition to middle school, and then transition to a high school with a much larger enrollment, it can be overwhelming.

Lee and Smith (1993, 1995, 1997) examined the relationship between school size and student outcomes and found that there is a negative relationship between a large

number of students in a school and student learning. Smaller class sizes can have a positive impact on student achievement; however, according to Hattie (2015), the effect is very small. Teachers do not necessarily adjust their teaching based on class size. If a teacher's professional practice is poor, then class size will not matter and students' academic outcome can be affected negatively. Teachers will need to modify their instruction and provide ongoing and consistent feedback to improve student performance (Hattie, 2015).

The moves from elementary to middle and middle to high school can be quite challenging for students. In a study that examined achievement loss associated with transition, Alspaugh (1998) explored the relationship between school-to-school transitions and high school dropout rates. He found that school size had a differential effect on the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and education outcomes. As school size increased, the relationship between SES and education outcomes also increased. As the number of students per grade increased, achievement loss associated with transition also increased (Alspaugh, 1998). Alspaugh (1998) also discovered that larger high schools tend to have higher dropout rates. Further research is needed to explore the relative influence of SES, school size, and transition on high school dropout (Alspaugh, 1998).

**School organization.** The structure of the school and its environment has been a focus for districts and state agencies in recent years. Overall, the goal is to increase personalized support for students and create improved conditions for teaching and learning (Warren et al., 2011). Common features of American high schools increase the challenge of students making a successful transition (Herlihy, 2007). Because high

schools are typically larger and more bureaucratic than elementary and middle schools, this can lead to depersonalization and a lack of sense of community (Lee & Smith, 1997). Lee and Bryk (1989) found that most large public high schools have curricular tracks and sort students into different groups. Furthermore, the transition may be more difficult for low-income African American students who tend to show a decline in academic motivation and performance once they enter high school (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Newman et al., 2000). Lee and Smith (1995, 1997) suggested that the challenge for these students may be due to the quality and climate of a school reflecting the larger community in which it is located. In a study of 22 high and low performing African American students' transition to high school, Newman et al. (2000) found that organization of classes and length of class periods were two important aspects of whether or not these students were successful in school. Newman et al. (2000) also found that school transition can also be challenging for Latino students, especially if they are English language learners, and for students with disabilities (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

It is important for school districts to be aware that multiple transitions have an effect on student learning (Uvass & McKeivitt, 2013). School districts should work to minimize multiple transitions. Implementation of these changes can increase student academic and social success. To help ease transition, Lee and Smith (1995) and Uvass and McKeivitt (2013) suggested a “schools-within-a school” approach. A core group of students and staff is kept together for most classes within a school setting. A “schools-within-a school” approach can minimize transitions and also assist with building relationships among the students and staff. This type of reform is embraced by 15% of U.S. high schools and is considered feasible and cost-effective (Lee & Smith, 1995;

Uvass & McKeivitt, 2013). The Freshman Academy does provide a version of a “schools-within-a school” approach for the students and staff. English and math teachers teach classes and meet together upstairs at Morrison and the science and social studies teachers teach classes and meet together downstairs. The Freshman Academy has two core classrooms next door to each other and one core class is directly across the hall. For example, there are two English classes next door and one class directly across the hall. This approach allows teachers and students to be in close proximity, helps teachers to keep a closer watch on these students, and helps to build relationships. Students are also able to move to their classes with fewer distractions during class changes.

Changes in the organization of instruction often create difficulties for students. High schools can have a variety of structured schedules, which may or may not fit the needs of individual students. Some schools have 4x4 scheduling, block scheduling, or a traditional seven period day. The schedule drives the daily operation of the school and impacts a number of decisions for students including when they attend classes, change classes, interact with the teachers, peers, and other staff, eat lunch, go to their locker, and ride the bus. The Freshman Academy provides students with a double-block Algebra I course because of low Grade 8 math grades and SOL performance. Students have this class each day with the same teacher for 1.5 hours to help strengthen their math skills and “catch up” with the ninth grade students who demonstrate strong enough skills to take traditional Algebra I. Students in the Freshman Academy may also be enrolled in a double-block ninth grade English class because of low English grades coupled with low Reading SOL scores. If students are placed in both double-block Algebra I and double-block ninth grade English classes, this limits their opportunities to take an additional



elective class. Course recommendations from the middle school teachers and counselors are provided to the high school in February to assist the high school counselors with early scheduling. The high school counselors are responsible for placing the students in the appropriate classes. Adjustments to schedules are made based on students' spring SOL performance.

### **Addressing Academic Preparation**

**Purpose of transition programs.** Researchers have indicated that adolescents need programs that can facilitate and specifically address their transition from middle to high school (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Gibson, 2006; Hertzog & Morgan, 1997; Mac Iver, 1990; Warren et al., 2011). When schools made a concerted effort to develop effective transition programs for ninth graders, there was an increase in promotion rates, a decrease in the number of dropouts, an increase in pass rates on statewide achievement tests, and an increase in on-time graduation rates (Bottoms, 2008; Gibson, 2006; Kerr, 2002; Legters & Kerr, 2001; Smith, 1997).

Smith (1997) found that full transition programs work for students when the school provides complete support in which school staff and parents fully commit to students' successful transition. Researchers have shown that interventions, even for students who are just below average, have an impact on high school graduation rates (Legters & Kerr, 2001; Gibson, 2006, Metzger, 2006).

Morrison High School has decreased its dropout rate over the last three years from 3.9% to 3.1% and has increased its cohort completion rate over the last three years from 89.8% to 95.6% (VDOE, 2017). The Freshman Academy has been able to help keep students from dropping out of school and graduating on time. Several components of the Freshman Academy assist students with improving and maintaining their grades,

attendance, discipline, and promotion to tenth grade. It is not enough to place students in certain classes based on academic deficits from the eighth grade. Students in the Freshman Academy are provided with opportunities to team with teachers who are focused on meeting their needs as ninth grade students and can provide them with strong instruction, support, and consistency throughout their ninth grade year. The activities are designed for the at-risk ninth grader who needs to feel welcomed, connected, and supported.

It is critical to support the needs of the ninth grade students to equip them with the tools for success throughout high school; however, full transition programs, programs involving students, staff, and parents are typically not in place to assist students in their transition (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Smith, 1997). Gibson (2006) suggested that schools develop programs that are balanced structurally and instructionally. More specifically, Gibson noted that these programs should include pre-high school activities and ongoing activities that connect students to their high school community throughout the school year.

Transition programs can provide both structural and instructional supports to meet a variety of needs for high school students (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Kerr (2002) recommended that schools implement a variety of programs to target areas of concern in order to prevent failures, alleviate student fears regarding high school, and promote student achievement. The Freshman Academy aims to align its activities to alleviate concern and prevent failures. The Freshman Academy aims to provide these supports through the various program inputs and elements. Before students begin their transition to high school, conversations and meetings take place to set students up for success. High

school counselors visit the middle schools to discuss what is expected at the high school. Once students have been identified as candidates for the Freshman Academy based on grades, attendance, discipline, and SOL performance, the Freshman Academy team, consisting of the ninth grade administrator, freshman lead teacher, teachers, and school counselors, provide structural and instructional support for students through double-block classes, tutoring, clubs and various activities (Homework Club, Dream Girls/Men on the Move, Town Hall meetings, IOU Café, FLEX, and Grade Recovery) opportunities.

### **Smaller Learning Communities**

The Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) program was established to address the academic issues as a result of students finding it difficult to navigate throughout large (1,000 or more students), impersonal high schools and to address concerns about school safety and low levels of achievement and graduation for many students. The program awards discretionary grants for up to 60 months to local educational agencies (LEAs) to support the implementation of SLCs (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). SLC grants have helped schools implement structural changes in their organization and classroom practices, have provided staff development specific to their SLCs, and have reorganized their curricula or instructional staff based upon the content and structure of their SLCs. SLC schools are expected to report the number of students involved in certain strategies and/or structures, to include Career and Freshman Academies; Schools-Within-a-School; Magnet Schools; Block Scheduling; Career Clusters, Pathways, and Majors; Adult Advocates or Mentors; Teacher Advisory Program; and Teacher Teams (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Case studies of five high school transition programs are reviewed in

this section and the next. Here, the small learning communities of Chico High School and Twilight Academy are described.

**Chico High School.** Metzger (2006) highlighted Chico High School, a recipient of the SLC grant, which implemented several programs during 2001-2005 to address perceived academic need. By 2005, 64% of the freshmen were enrolled in an SLC structure, including SOUL, a two-year transition program for highly at-risk students and STAGE, a performing arts academy. A critical component of the SLC program includes several strategies: a campus-wide literacy program, a mentoring program, a freshman transition program, and a parent and family involvement program. Chico High experienced increased reading scores, a reduction in the achievement gap among students, and an increased sense of community campus-wide.

**Twilight Academy.** Another example of an SLC is the Twilight Academy, an alternative program in a large, urban high school located in southeastern Pennsylvania, designed to address a growing number of students who were not successful in a traditional classroom in a traditional school. The State Department of Education approved this program to accommodate a total of 60 students in Grades 9–12 who had low academic performance and chronic discipline issues (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). The Academy had the following staff on board to support the students: an assistant principal, four classroom teachers (one each for English, social studies, mathematics, and science class), one physical education teacher, one guidance counselor, one secretary, and two security guards. Classes were held from 3:00 p.m.-7:00 p.m.

Students were enrolled in small classes to make the classroom more manageable for the teacher and to provide each student with individual attention, movement in the

hallways during class was limited to keep students focused on instruction, students were provided with rides to and from school; and students attended weekly group counseling sessions to provide additional support. D'Angelo and Zemanick (2009) found that some of the successes of the Academy were attributed to the trust, respect, and rapport that was established between students, staff, school and juvenile justice authorities. The relationships between alternative education and traditional teachers allowed teachers to be flexible and willing to think outside the norm. A thorough curriculum allowed teachers to plan with many different daily activities. Initially, the staff had little hope of the students graduating; however, all 12 students who were eligible to graduate accomplished this goal. The Twilight Academy has a waiting list of students wanting to get into the program each school year (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

### **Transition Strategies**

Since the transition from middle to high school is not a one-time event, but rather a process that takes place over an extended period of time (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999), it is essential that students receive support and guidance throughout the transition. A variety of strategies have been shown to help ease student transition to high school. A statewide and three high school case studies below provide insight to the successes that have emerged from the implementation of particular transition strategies.

**Maryland high schools.** Legters and Kerr (2001) explored programs and practices that focused on ninth grade transition in 174 Maryland high schools. The researchers wanted to determine whether the use of these programs and practices was positively associated with ninth grade attendance, achievement, promotion, and dropout outcomes. Legters and Kerr (2001) found that a number of Maryland high schools were

using a diverse set of practices with their ninth graders to increase student membership in the high school community. A quarter of the high schools had a school-within-a-school, academy, or other SLC for ninth graders, while a third of schools provided students with an extra subject period of instruction, or Double Dose, of a core academic class when extra help is needed. Nearly 80% of schools in the study reported that teachers used instructional strategies such as cooperative learning or student-directed projects or activities an average of once a week or more. Almost all (94%) Maryland high schools conducted orientation programs or assemblies for ninth grade students before the students arrived to high school. Almost half of the schools surveyed provided a summer enrichment program for entering ninth graders. Legters and Kerr (2001) also discovered that high-poverty; high-minority schools had significantly higher ninth grade promotion rates when there were high levels of implementation of certain programs and practices. In addition, high-poverty, high-minority schools that utilized a widespread school-within-a-school practice showed significant improvements on promotion, dropout and achievement outcomes between 1993-1994 and 1999-2000.

**Valley Stream High School.** Warren et al. (2011) examined ninth grade programs at several large metropolitan high schools that served approximately 1,200-3,500 students. These schools had large percentages of students who were non-White, had limited English proficiency, or were from low-income families. In addition, a sizable percentage of students who were completing eighth grade or entering ninth grade were considered off track for graduation. Each school identified successful strategies to ensure smooth student transition. For example, Valley Stream High School identified students who were off track in eighth grade based on low state test performance. These students

were required by the district to attend a two-week summer transition program at the school, where they received additional support in science, math, and literacy. Teachers were also required to provide support to students through before and after school tutoring. Guidance counselors presented information to ninth grade students about graduation requirements, transcripts, and requirements to be promoted to 10th grade. Counselors also helped students fill in a four-year plan for their course work. An assistant principal monitored ninth grade performance and led the freshman initiative. Valley Stream High School reported increased summer transition attendance and slight improvements in student grades and performance on state assessments. Warren et al. found that the school staff became more proactive in their efforts to use data effectively to monitor interventions and track student progress. Valley Stream also showed an increase in students being promoted to the tenth grade. Warren et al. (2011) credits this with students being provided with opportunities for credit recovery.

**Fillmore High School.** In another example, Fillmore High School identified a high percentage of students entering ninth grade off track based on data the counselor and assistant principals collected from the students' middle schools and the district data portal (Warren et al., 2011). The counselor and assistant principals met with the students prior to students entering the high school. All students were invited to attend an orientation at the end of the summer to meet school staff and take a tour of the building. Teachers used high yield instructional strategies with ninth grade students, such as Cornell note taking and keeping a vocabulary bank. Double dosing was provided to support students who struggled in English and math. Students worked with adult advocates on scheduling and monitoring their academic progress. Students also received additional support after

school at the Homework Academy. Fillmore High School reported seeing a decrease in discipline concerns and a steady increase in student performance. Warren et al. noted that providing monthly conferences with their counselor and meeting with a student advisor each quarter provided ninth graders with an increased sense of belonging and group identity.

**Hawthorne High School.** Lastly, Hawthorne High School focused on eighth grade students prior to transitioning to ninth grade. Guidance counselors, the ninth grade SLC coordinator, and teachers visited middle schools in the spring to provide information to eighth grade students about the high school. All incoming students were invited to a two-day orientation to the school during the summer. The district identified off track students using performance on the eighth grade state tests. These students were required to attend a two-week summer transition program at the school, where they received additional support in science, math, and literacy. The school organized ninth and 10th grade students into houses, with teams of teachers who support approximately 125 students. The ninth grade coordinator managed off-track students' academic intervention plans, regularly communicated with teachers about the academic performance of these students during the school year, and arranged conferences with the students to discuss their progress. Hawthorne offered an enrichment class for a full period daily for all ninth graders. Students had four enrichment periods a week that addressed their four weakest areas on the benchmark assessments. Teachers were required to develop intervention packets to provide students the opportunity to recover credits when they fall behind (Warren et al., 2011). Hawthorne High School identified an improvement in student grades and promotion based on the end of year assessments. Relationships among



teachers and students, as well as guidance counselors and students also improved. This was a result of teachers and guidance counselors visiting the middle school and meeting with students prior to them entering high school and maintaining those relationships throughout the ninth grade year. Warren et al. found that student performance improved because teachers and counselors reviewed student grades and behavior at the end of each marking period. Students and parents were notified when students had fallen behind in their classes and were provided with an opportunity to recover assignments.

### **On Track for Graduation**

Students are considered to be “on track” for graduation when they earn the required amount of credits during the first year of high school (Neild, 2009); however, few states, districts, or even schools have developed monitoring systems that will identify students who are not “on track” early in their high school careers (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). To keep students on track, students need parental involvement and supervision. They also need to be around peers that do not influence risk-taking behaviors and declining academic performance (Neild, 2009). Anderson et al. (2000) suggested that teachers and administrators constantly monitor student performance by looking for indicators that students were not transitioning successfully; student grades, appropriateness of classroom behavior, or inappropriate relationships with peers. This information can help the school staff be a better support system for students as they move into high school.

When students enter ninth grade, their goal is to earn credits and meet other state requirements toward graduation (Neild, 2009). In the state of Virginia, ninth grade students are expected to earn a minimum of 22 standard units of credit by passing

required courses and electives, and earn at least six verified credits by passing end-of-course SOL tests or other assessments (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2016). A ninth grader seeking an advanced studies diploma is expected to complete a minimum of 26 standard units of credit and earn at least nine verified credits. In 2013, the VDOE placed even more stringent graduation requirements on students entering ninth grade. These students must now earn a Career and Technical Education credential, as well as complete one virtual course. Students are considered “on track” in the state of Virginia if they earn at least five standard units of credit and pass state mandated assessments by the end of their ninth grade year (VDOE, 2016). It is important for all school districts to put measures in place with similar demographics to track the educational progress of individual students from year to year.

The Freshman Academy administrator and lead teacher monitor students’ progress throughout the year by checking grades, attendance, and discipline during each mid-quarter and quarter. They meet to discuss the progress that each student is making and determine next steps such as meeting with the student, contacting parents, and providing tutoring. Student success in the ninth grade year is an indicator of being “on track” or graduating on time. Building a foundation for success in the high school years is established in the ninth grade. The Freshman Academy aims to help students with a strong foundation in the ninth grade by providing strong, supportive, and caring teachers, school counselors, and administrators.

### **Collaboration Among Stakeholder Groups**

Teachers, school counselors, and administrators must demonstrate a willingness to take on the challenge of helping ninth graders make the transition. School staff may perceive different concerns about school transition than students. There is some evidence

that high school transition programs have guided teachers, counselors, and administrators toward a mutual understanding about what successful transition programs can look like (Mizelle & Mullins, 1997, as cited in Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006); however, research has been limited regarding the collaboration of teachers, school counselors, and administrators. Research conducted by Bottoms (2008) highlights a number of ways key stakeholders involved in ninth grade transition programs will need to commit and collaborate to expand opportunities for students to improve academic and behavioral performance. Freshman Academy teachers plan and discuss opportunities to create supportive relationships between students and their peers and students and adults. It is important to include common planning time and professional development for teachers as part of the transition program.

Cooperation involves joint planning with administrators, counselors, teachers, students, and parents. Consensus needs to be achieved among the key people about what needs to be done and who will be responsible. When developing its plan, the transition planning team should consider three dimensions of transition programs: student needs and concerns, timing of activities, and audience. The Freshman Academy team meets several times throughout the year to give feedback regarding the overall progress of the program and how well the students are progressing. It is in these meetings where decisions are made regarding which program elements need to be tweaked.

**Transition concerns among stakeholders.** Smith et al. (2008) conducted interviews with high school teachers, guidance counselors, and one school principal of a large public school district in the Midwest. All were asked to define transition and talk about areas of transition that were challenging to ninth graders. Questions probed their

expectations of the academic, social, and organizational changes that may occur in high school. Staff interviews revealed concerns with student transition, such as earning credits, academic expectations, and attendance policies. Teachers and counselors focused on the attendance policy and felt that students did not appreciate the seriousness even though it had been shared with students and their families. They were concerned about the number of absences and how those absences affected student performance. The principal was concerned about the rigor of ninth grade classes. He felt that students should begin their freshman year with elective-type courses to give them more of an exploratory start. He believed the students would feel more comfortable and would get better academic results. Smith et al. (2008) suggested that high schools and the feeder middle schools needed to work collaboratively to identify the distinctive features of their academic, social, and organizational attributes. School staff also consistently identified the need for better communication between eighth grade teachers and teachers in the freshman center.

**School counselors as gatekeepers.** The school counselor has the responsibility of providing students with the information needed to be able to navigate high school (Cooper & Liou, 2007). The VDOE (2004) and the Virginia School Counselor Association (2008) described the school counselor as having unique qualifications and skills to address all students' academic, personal/social, and career development needs. These skills can particularly be beneficial to the success of a ninth grade student. According to the Virginia School Counselor Association (2008), the school counselor:

Serves a vital role in maximizing student achievement, social and career development; promotes equity and access to opportunities and rigorous educational experiences for all students; supports a safe learning environment;

and collaborates with other stakeholders to promote student achievement; and addresses the needs of all students through prevention and intervention programs that are a part of a comprehensive school counseling program. (p. 6)

The role of school counselors at the middle school and high school is significant (Smith et al., 2008). School counselors, serving as liaisons between middle and high school, can bridge the gaps in student, parent, and staff misconceptions regarding expectations at the high school. School counselors must work closely with parents, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders to promote learning and assist students with achieving their education, career, and personal goals (Virginia School Counselor Association, 2008).

The school counselors in the Freshman Academy adhere to the national, state, and local school counseling standards. They assist students, school staff, and parents with educational and social goals. They create an effective scheduling system for students, develop and implement effective programs for the students. Some of these programs include meeting with middle school teachers and school counselors to ease the transition to high school, providing evening parent and student workshops about courses, standardized testing, careers, and planning for college. In addition, the school counselors implement strategies to maximize the total development of students.

**Parental involvement.** Parents play an important role in their child's transition. Involved parents know firsthand what their children are achieving in school and can help their children formulate career and educational goals and a plan for achieving those goals (Bottoms, 2008). One of the key links to a student's academic achievement, attendance, attitude, and behavior is parental involvement. Parents who are involved during the

transition to high school usually stay involved all through the high school years (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Schools should consider the role of the parent as an integral component to the success of the transition program.

The Freshman Academy provides multiple opportunities for parents to be involved with their child's education. Parents are invited to attend Freshman Welcome Night where they find out about program and course offerings, clubs and activities, the high school schedule, and athletics. Parents and students also receive a tour of the school. Parents are invited to attend a number of meetings throughout the year that keep them abreast of their student's progress. In addition, the Freshman Academy holds parent workshops and the parents receive a weekly phone message from the principal that keep parents informed of the events and activities throughout the year.

### **Summary**

The move from middle to high school is a critical transition for high school students. Schools will need to be sure to provide students and parents with pertinent information about high school. They will also need to assess their organizational structure and staff to provide a variety of transition program activities to ensure success with student achievement, attendance, and discipline. To keep students "on track" after entering high school, additional resources may be necessary to provide SLCs or academies, two strategies continuously supported by the research. It is also important to include all stakeholders, especially parents in the plan to continuously improve the transition program. The ultimate goal is to prepare students before they enter high school and to ensure student success throughout high school. There are a number of components that makeup an effective transition program. Researchers have shown that when schools

have made a concerted effort to develop effective transition programs for ninth graders, there has been an increase in promotion rates, a decrease in the number of dropouts, and an increase in pass rates on statewide achievement tests (Bottoms, 2008; Gibson, 2006; Kerr, 2002; Legters & Kerr, 2001).

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate through both quantitative and qualitative methods the impact of Morrison High School's ninth grade transition program, the Freshman Academy, on student outcomes such as GPA, attendance rates, number of discipline referrals, pass rates on Virginia Standards of Learning End of Course tests, and credits earned. By ensuring the success of its freshman students, Morrison High School can increase its promotion and on-time graduation rates. This chapter focuses on the research design of the study and evaluation questions and descriptions of the methods used in the study, including the participants, instruments, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

#### **Program Evaluation of the Freshman Academy Transition Program**

Schools are required to provide research-based activities and programs to assist with student learning and overall success. The purpose of this study was to conduct a program evaluation of the Freshman Academy transition program for program improvement. As a means to systematically provide timely evaluative information for use in decision-making, the CIPP Evaluation Model provides a framework to allow the evaluator to make decisions regarding program evaluation (Stufflebeam, 1971, 2003). CIPP is an acronym for Context, Input, Process and Product. The key components of the CIPP model include:



- Context, which assesses needs, assets, and problems with a defined environment;
- Input, which assesses strategies, work plans, and budgets of a selected approach;
- Process, which monitors, documents, and assesses program activities; and
- Product, which interprets significance of the program

This program evaluation focused on the final P, product, in examining the intended outcomes of the program. The CIPP evaluation model emphasizes “learning-by-doing” to identify corrections for problematic project features. Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) emphasized that the most fundamental tenet of the model is “not to *prove*, but to *improve*” (p. 331).

The CIPP model is a comprehensive approach to evaluation (Stufflebeam, 1971, 2003). Research conducted by Fitzpatrick, Sanders, and Worthen (2011) illustrates that the principles of the CIPP model have remained solid and it is not necessary to wait for a program to be completed before an evaluation takes place. The CIPP model helped me to identify the needs of ninth-grade students; to prescribe specific strategies to assist them during transition; to identify barriers, make adjustments; and, lastly, measure outcomes to determine the merit, worth, and significance of the program.

The CIPP evaluation model has unique features that can help effectively examine the Freshman Academy transition program. The CIPP evaluation model can assist teachers, school counselors, and administrators in planning and guiding ninth grade transition program needs, measuring progress toward meeting specified goals, engaging participants in an ongoing process to assess and monitor the quality of implementation,

and using evaluation results for improvement and sustainability. The CIPP evaluation model can also provide information regarding the efficacy of a program. Because this formative evaluation will be used for future decision-making, it is important to be able to clearly discuss the findings and have evidence to support them. For the purpose of this study, a formative evaluation was conducted to demonstrate the ninth grade transition program's overall effectiveness or merit and worth. The focus is on five of the six intended program outcomes as well as the perceptions of teachers, school counselors, and administrators regarding program effectiveness.

### **Research Design**

A mixed-methods research design was utilized to provide information regarding any issues the Freshman Academy should address, to determine whether the goals and priorities are aligned to the needs of the program, to assess what resources are needed, and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the ninth grade transition program. It is important to assess the program to determine if the implemented objectives and overall goals are working. According to Creswell (2009), a mixed methods approach to a research study allows the overall strength of a study to be greater than using either a qualitative or quantitative approach alone. Utilizing a mixed methods approach also increases validity or triangulation of the measurement of the Freshman Academy. This approach can shed light or increase the school staff's understanding of which components are working and which ones are not working (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011).

Quantitative data (student outcome data) and qualitative data (teacher, school counselor, and administrator interviews) were collected and analyzed to revise existing goals for ninth grade students, develop new goals, and assist all stakeholders to measure

the impact of the program in regard to students' needs. Planning decisions may be made regarding the establishment of new objectives, modification of existing objectives, or confirmation of present objectives (Stufflebeam, 2003). Any unmet needs identified from the student outcome data and interview responses may assist the administrative staff at Morrison with future planning decisions. Feedback was provided to teachers, school counselors, and administrator in the form of a final written report.

### **Context**

The study took place at Morrison High School, an urban high school in southeastern Virginia. During the 2013-2014 school year, Morrison High School had an enrollment of 1,456 students, consisting of the following population: 45% African American; 40% Caucasian; 6% Hispanic; 4% American Indian; 3% Asian; 1% Native Hawaiian; and 3% two or more ethnicities. During the 2014-2015 school year, Morrison had an enrollment of 1,357 students, consisting of the following population: 47% African American; 30% Caucasian; 15% Hispanic; 4% American Indian; 5% Asian; 1% Native Hawaiian; and 2% two or more ethnicities. During the 2015-2016 school year, Morrison had an enrollment of 1,445 students, consisting of the following population: 47% African American; 31% Caucasian; 15% Hispanic; 1% American Indian; 4% Asian; 2% Native Hawaiian; and 3% two or more ethnicities. All entering ninth grade students took core classes including English, Biology or Earth Science, math (Algebra I or higher), and a social science (World Geography or higher). Each ninth grade student also participated in a Health and PE class and another elective class. The student daily bell schedule is an alternating schedule consisting of one, daily 55-minute block during first period and three

90-minute blocks during second through seventh periods. There are three lunch periods, one of which was split between classes.

For the purpose of this program evaluation, GPA, attendance rates, number of discipline referrals, SOL pass rate, and credits earned data were included for the 180 students who were selected and participated in the Freshman Academy during 2013-2014, 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years. Students were identified to participate in the program prior to coming to high school based on having a history of low performance in language arts and math; having five or more absences during a marking period; having three or more discipline referrals; and having low SOL performance in reading, math, and science in the ranges of 350-374 during eighth grade. If students met at least two of the four criteria and failed two of the three SOL assessments, they were considered at-risk and were selected to participate in the Freshman Academy.

### **Evaluation Questions**

Key evaluation questions assisted in focusing on the initiatives and outcomes of the Freshman Academy. The evaluation questions were used to determine how well the program is meeting its goals. The program evaluation is designed to answer the following evaluation questions:

1. How are students in the Freshman Academy performing according to the benchmark intended outcomes of a GPA of at least 2.0, 90% attendance or higher, fewer than three discipline referrals, passing scores on the Algebra I, Biology or Earth Science, and World Geography EOC assessments, and the completion of at least five standard units of credit?

2. Is there a statistically significant difference between the proportion of Freshman Academy students and non-Academy ninth grader students in terms benchmark intended outcomes, including GPA of at least 2.0, 90% attendance or higher, fewer than three discipline referrals, passing scores on the Algebra I, Biology or Earth Science, and World Geography EOC assessments, and the completion of at least five standard units of credit?
3. What are the perceptions of teachers, school counselors, and administrators regarding the influence of the transition program on students' GPA, attendance, discipline, SOL scores, and credits earned?

### **Participants**

Purposive sampling was used to select a total of twelve teachers, school counselors, and administrators to participate in the program evaluation because they represent a group of experts in the school who can provide the desired information for the study and they drive the Freshman Academy (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). Pseudonyms were used in place of staff names to ensure the anonymity of all participants. Table 1 shows the representation of participants in each interview including the average years of experience with ninth grade students and average years of employment at Morrison High School. All participants were invited to participate in the study via an email invitation (Appendix A) explaining the interview. They were also sent the Informed Consent form (Appendix B) to explain the parameters of their involvement.

Table 1

*Participants Represented in Interviews*

Interview Participants	N	Average Years' Experience with Ninth Graders	Average Years' Experience at Morrison High School
Teachers	6	14.0	13.7
School Counselors	3	11.7	9.7
Administrators	3	13.0	10.0

**Teachers.** A total of six ninth grade teachers including a freshman lead teacher at Morrison High School provided insight regarding the impact of the interventions and strategies implemented. They are responsible for monitoring their students' grades, attendance, discipline, and SOL performance. Their expertise is critical to the success and persistence of the program.

**School Counselors.** There are three school counselors at Morrison High School who work closely with freshmen students. They communicate with middle school counselors and parents to determine the best approach for high school courses. School counselors create student schedules, as well as a four-year course plan for students when they enter high school. They work closely with school staff to provide classroom guidance, foster a more effective learning climate, and implement effective programs for students. They provide insight to activities and strategies that may be a good fit for the freshman students they serve.

**Administrators.** One current administrator and two former administrators at Morrison High School have had the responsibility of specifically overseeing the freshman grade level. Administrators are responsible for assisting in establishing the school's student discipline plan and the school's plan for ensuring a safe and orderly environment.

Information regarding activities and strategies can be garnered from their daily interactions with freshman students.

### **Data Sources**

Both quantitative and qualitative data were utilized to answer the evaluation questions. The program evaluation included two data sources: 1) student grades, attendance, discipline history, SOL data, and credits earned, and 2) teacher, school counselor, and administrator interviews.

**Student outcome data.** GPA, attendance, discipline, SOL scores, and credits earned for the 2013-2014, 2014-2015, and the 2015-2016 academic years were collected on the 180 students who participated in the Freshman Academy each year, as well as for the ninth graders at Morrison High School who were not enrolled in the Academy. These data were requested from The Newick Public Schools (NPS) Office of Instructional Accountability. Student outcome data were coded prior to my receiving the data to maintain student anonymity.

**Teacher, school counselor, and administrator interviews.** Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with six general and special education teachers, three school counselors, and three administrators. Each interview participant was able to contribute to the understanding of the connection of the Freshman Academy to improve student outcomes. A total of eight open-ended questions was posed to the teachers, school counselors, and administrators. One or more of four follow-up questions were posed to the teachers, school counselors, and administrators based on the product component of the CIPP model. A list of the interview questions is located in Appendix C.

## **Data Collection**

A submission of a request for approval to conduct research on the Freshman Academy at Morrison High School was sent to the College of William & Mary Education Internal Review Committee (EDIRC). IRB approval was granted by the EDIRC and then an NPS Research Authorization Request application was completed and submitted to the Research Authorization Committee (RAC) for research approval. Approval to conduct my study was granted by the Newick Public Schools' RAC. NPS provided student outcome data including GPA, attendance, discipline, SOL scores, and credits earned for 2013-2014, 2014-2015 & 2015-2016. Data were provided in an Excel spreadsheet and received via email. Student names were replaced with code numbers to mask their identity.

An email invitation (Appendix A) explaining the teacher, school counselor, administrator interview was sent to six teachers, three administrators, and three school counselors inviting them to participate in the study. An informed consent form (Appendix B) was also sent to the participants prior to the interviews. All participants were notified that their participation is completely voluntary and they may withdraw from the study at any time. Each participant responded to the email invitation and agreed to participate in the interview session. The interviews were scheduled after school and completed within two weeks.

Prior to conducting the actual interviews, I asked two administrators who are non-participants in my study to participate in individual practice interview sessions to determine how long it would take to complete the interviews. Based on the practice sessions, I determined that it should take the teachers, school counselors, and



administrators approximately 45 minutes to complete the interview, although actual times varied.

**Interview protocol.** The individual, formal, structured interviews were conducted at Morrison High School in several secured locations to collect qualitative data regarding the impact of the ninth grade transition program on students' academic achievement. Each of the interviews took place after school. I greeted each participant and explained the process for the interview. I informed each participant that his or her participation in the interview was strictly voluntary and all responses would be kept completely confidential. Each participant was provided a hard copy of the consent form. Each was provided time to read and sign the consent form. I served as facilitator during the interviews and asked questions regarding the ninth grade transition program to address issues or ideas raised by each teacher, school counselor, and administrator. I took detailed notes while the interviews were recorded. Table 2 illustrates the evaluation questions along with the data sources and analysis.

Table 2

*Program Evaluation Questions, Data Sources, and Data Analysis*

Evaluation Question	Data Source	Data Analysis
1. How are students in the Freshman Academy performing according to the benchmark intended outcomes of a GPA of at least 2.0, 90% attendance or higher, fewer than three discipline referrals, passing scores on the Algebra I, Biology or Earth Science, and World Geography EOC assessments, and the completion of at least five standard units of credit?	Freshman Academy, student GPA, attendance, discipline, SOL results, and credits earned for 9 <sup>th</sup> graders in the 2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016 academic years	Descriptive statistics using One-way ANOVA
2. Is there a statistically significant difference between proportion of Freshman Academy students and non-Academy ninth graders students in terms of benchmark intended outcomes, including GPA of at least 2.0, 90% attendance or higher, fewer than three discipline referrals, passing scores on the Algebra I, Biology or Earth Science, and World Geography EOC assessments, and the completion of at least five standard units of credit?	Freshman Academy and non-Academy student GPA, attendance, discipline, SOL results, and credits earned for 9 <sup>th</sup> graders in the 2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016 academic years	Descriptive statistics using Independent samples T-test
3. What are the perceptions of teachers, school counselors, and administrators regarding the influence of the transition program on students' GPA, attendance, discipline, SOL scores, and credits earned?	Teacher/Administrator/School Counselor interviews	Qualitative description of responses from interviews. Emergent themes and codes from audio transcriptions and notes.

## **Data Analysis**

Two data collection instruments (student outcome data and teacher, school counselor, and administrator interviews) provided both quantitative and qualitative data for analysis. I conducted quantitative data analysis on the student outcome data (GPA, attendance, discipline, SOL scores, and credits earned). Interviews were conducted utilizing teachers, school counselors, and administrators as participants.

### **Analysis of Student Outcome Data**

Student outcome data were analyzed utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). These data were analyzed to answer evaluation questions 1 and 2. Descriptive statistics from a One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to determine whether there were any statistically significant differences between the three Freshman Academy cohort groups. Descriptive statistics from an Independent Samples T test were utilized to compare the means of Freshman Academy students and Non-Freshman Academy students to determine whether there was a significant difference.

### **Analysis of Interviews**

I utilized qualitative analysis for the teacher, school counselor, and administrator interviews. To be sure I had accurately captured the responses to the interview questions, I sent a copy of the responses to the interview participants to verify their responses. All 12 of the interview participants responded via email regarding their interview responses. Only two adjustments needed to be made based on updated responses from the interview participants. I erased the audio recordings after all interview responses were transcribed and verified.

I developed a system to analyze each interview based on the audio recordings, handwritten notes, and transcripts. Transcripts and notes from the interviews were organized and examined to identify emerging themes and patterns in the data to answer the evaluation questions and provide more detail regarding the outcomes of the program. Codes were assigned to various responses from each interview participant.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The evaluation process was closely monitored and reviewed by my dissertation committee to determine whether a set of evaluative activities were well-designed and working to their potential. I maintained the confidentiality requirements of the Research Authorization Committee (RAC), as well as the requirements and procedures of The College of William and Mary's EDIRC. The school system and individual school will remain anonymous in the study. The interview participants will remain confidential. Teachers, school counselors, and administrators were not identified in the recordings, notes or transcripts. I conducted all research with the utmost ethical care.

I took precautions by doing the following: obtained written permission from the RAC prior to conducting my research study; requested that the Supervisor of Instructional Accountability in NPS review all instruments prior to administration and review final results; reporting all study instruments to the NPS RAC; recording and taking notes during all interviews in a safe, non-threatening environment; requesting permission to participate in my study; providing consent forms to each interview participant and reminding all participants that participation in the survey or interviews is strictly voluntary, and keeping all participant names confidential.

This evaluation will adhere to The Program Evaluation Standards (Joint Committee on Standards for Education Evaluation, 2011) in the four areas of propriety, utility, feasibility, and accuracy.

### **Propriety**

Propriety standards are intended to protect the rights of individuals affected by an evaluation. As the researcher, I was open and responsive to the stakeholders' needs and concerns and I was committed to conducting a complete and fair examination of the program. I took into consideration any political or cultural values that are important to the evaluation. All participation in this study was completely voluntary and each participant was informed of the guidelines to include receiving informed consent, maintaining rights to privacy, and being assured anonymity or confidentiality. An evaluation involves a partnership between the evaluator and client (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011). Prior review and approval of the study, data collection, and instruments by the dissertation committee and RAC ensured protection of the participants.

### **Utility**

Utility standards are intended to increase the extent to which program stakeholders find evaluation processes and products valuable in meeting their needs. My education, experiences, and expertise will assist in guiding an "informative, timely, and influential evaluation" (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011, p. 84).

### **Feasibility**

Feasibility standards are intended to increase evaluation effectiveness and efficiency. Interview participants will have the opportunity to interview when and where it is convenient for them. They will be able to select a time and location for their

interview that is convenient for them. Participants will be encouraged to be honest and open regarding their responses. The evaluation procedures and resources will be clearly outlined and the time for data collection will be used to address evaluation questions (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011).

### **Accuracy**

Accuracy standards determine whether an evaluation has produced sound information. To ensure accuracy, quantitative (surveys, student outcome data) and qualitative data (interviews) will be appropriately analyzed so the evaluation questions can be answered effectively. Valid and reliable data collection methods will be used to determine the program's worth or merit (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011).

### **Role of the Researcher**

As an educator for 26 years, I have had many instructional experiences at a variety of levels. Over the years, my interest in ninth graders has increased. I have discovered through my role as a teacher and school administrator that many of the needs of the ninth grade student are not being met. Through my research, I expected to not only discover what may be working well in schools, but also discover a number of ways to improve school practice as it relates to ninth graders. According to Fitzpatrick et al., (2011), "The evaluator has to be a trusted person; yet be able to provide an outside objective opinion" (p. 17). Another role that I have as researcher is to encourage the use of the evaluation results not only for the improvement of the program, but to determine the program's merit and worth. Having an understanding of my role will assist the stakeholders to consider developmental changes in the program.

There is an area of potential bias for this study. I was an assistant principal of instruction at Morrison High School from 2011-2016. Due to the nature of established relationships, this could have an impact on the teachers' survey responses and how the school counselors and administrators respond to interview questions. As a former assistant principal at Morrison High School, I worked closely with the students, teachers, school counselors, and administrators who have been a part of the Freshman Academy. Certain ninth grade students have shown improvement in their achievement over the years in regard to GPA, attendance, discipline, promotion rates, and SOL performance. I believe this is in part due to the components of the Freshman Academy. I believe that the practices that have been implemented by the Morrison High School staff have shown to be effective in easing ninth grade transition for students. To eliminate or reduce bias and ensure the findings of the evaluation are reported fairly, I maintained a documentation system to include my notes on "evolving perceptions, procedures, methodological decisions, personal introspections, and developing insights to assist me in exploring how the evaluation design is emerging." (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011, p. 98). I also triangulated the data to reduce bias in self-reporting and to increase validity of study.

### **Summary**

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to describe the design of this program evaluation and to determine the impact of a ninth grade transition program, the Freshman Academy, on students' academic achievement. I employed Stufflebeam's (2003) product component of the CIPP model to achieve this purpose. Student outcome data was analyzed as part of the quantitative data collection to answer the first two evaluation questions. Teachers, school counselors, and administrators provided useful insights into the workings of the Freshman Academy at Morrison High School. Individual teacher, school counselor, and

administrator interviews were conducted as part of the qualitative data collection to answer the last evaluation question. These questions assisted in understanding the perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the influence of the transition program on students' GPA, attendance, discipline, SOL scores, and credits earned. The overall goal of this research was to provide information to educators to assist them in planning and implementing a successful transition program with targeted activities for ninth grade students.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The purpose of this formative evaluation was to determine the effectiveness of a ninth grade transition program on ninth grade achievement. Morrison High School's Freshman Academy was the focus for this study. In order to address the evaluation questions, the product component of Stufflebeam's revised (2003) CIPP evaluation model was employed to examine the intended outcomes of the Freshman Academy. This study primarily focused on student outcome data, including GPA, attendance, discipline, SOL scores, and completion of credits, as well as teacher, school counselor, and administrator interview data to determine the impact the transition program had on ninth grade students. This chapter provides an overview of the results of the study.

#### **Student Outcome Data**

Student outcome data were collected on GPA, attendance, discipline, SOL scores, and credits earned for the 2013-2014, 2014-2015, and 2015-2016 school years. Data were entered in an Excel spreadsheet and then imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), a data analysis program. They were then analyzed to inform the first two evaluation questions of the study. Tables 3-7 display the percentage of Freshman Academy and Non-Freshman Academy students who met the benchmark intended outcomes.

Table 3

*Percentage of Freshman Academy (FA) and Non-Freshman Academy (Non-FA) Students Meeting GPA Benchmark Intended Outcome 2013-2014, 2014-2015, & 2015-2016*

Year	Group	N	2.0 or higher GPA
2013-2014	FA	60	60
	Non-FA	231	76
2014-2015	FA	60	60
	Non-FA	244	77
2015-2016	FA	60	43
	Non-FA	225	75

Table 4

*Percentage of Freshman Academy (FA) and Non-Freshman Academy (Non-FA) Students Meeting Attendance Benchmark Intended Outcome 2013-2014, 2014-2015, & 2015-2016*

Year	Group	N	90% or higher Attendance
2013-2014	FA	60	85
	Non-FA	231	88
2014-2015	FA	60	85
	Non-FA	244	87
2015-2016	FA	60	78
	Non-FA	225	86

Table 5

*Percentage of Freshman Academy (FA) and Non-Freshman Academy (Non-FA) Students Meeting Discipline Benchmark Intended Outcome 2013-2014, 2014-2015, & 2015-2016*

Year	Group	<i>N</i>	Fewer than 3 Discipline Referrals
2013-2014	FA	60	95
	Non-FA	231	97
2014-2015	FA	60	97
	Non-FA	244	94
2015-2016	FA	60	97
	Non-FA	225	96

Table 6

*Percentage of Freshman Academy (FA) and Non-Freshman Academy (Non-FA) Students Meeting SOL Benchmark Intended Outcome 2013-2014, 2014-2015, & 2015-2016*

Year	Group	<i>N</i>	400 or higher Algebra I SOL	400 or higher Biology SOL	400 or higher Earth Science SOL	400 or higher World Geography SOL
2013-2014	FA	60	58	65	NA	70
	Non-FA	231	77	58		70
2014-2015	FA	60	45	42	NA	48
	Non-FA	244	55	68		63
2015-2016	FA	60	57	NA	45	60
	Non-FA	225	51		56	64

Table 7

*Percentage of Freshman Academy (FA) and Non-Freshman Academy (Non-FA) Students Meeting Credits Benchmark Intended Outcome 2013-2014, 2014-2015, & 2015-2016*

Year	Group	<i>N</i>	At least 5 Standard Units of Credit
2013-2014	FA	60	62
	Non-FA	231	81
2014-2015	FA	60	72
	Non-FA	244	84
2015-2016	FA	60	78
	Non-FA	225	92

### Evaluation Question 1

How are students in the Freshman Academy performing according to the program’s intended benchmark outcomes: GPA of at least 2.0; 90% attendance or higher; fewer than three discipline referrals; passing scores on the Algebra I, Biology or Earth Science, and World Geography EOC assessments; and the completion of at least five standard units of credit?

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted with the significance level set at  $p < .05$  to compare the performance of each Freshman Academy cohort from 2013-2014, 2014-2015, and 2015-2016, on the intended student outcomes.

**GPA.** Students who participate in the Freshman Academy are expected to earn and maintain a GPA of at least 2.0. The GPA for each cohort of Freshman Academy students was compared for the three years: 2013-2014 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 1.94$ ), 2014-2015 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 2.14$ ), and 2015-2016 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 1.85$ ). The ANOVA resulted in  $F(2, 177) = 2.99$ . There was not a significant difference in GPA between the three Freshman

Academy cohorts ( $p = .053$ ). Table 8 shows the ANOVA results for the GPA of students participating in the Freshman Academy during three years.

Table 8

*ANOVA Results for GPA of Freshman Academy Students 2013-2014, 2014-2015, & 2015-2016*

	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
Between Groups	2.678	2	1.339	2.985	.053
Within Groups	79.380	177	.448		
Total	82.058	179			

**Attendance.** Students who participate in the Freshman Academy are expected to attend school at least 90% of the time during each marking period. The attendance for each cohort of Freshman Academy students was compared for the three years: 2013-2014 ( $N = 60, M = 87.6$ ), 2014-2015 ( $N = 60, M = 88.2$ ), and 2015-2016 ( $N = 60, M = 86.0$ ). The ANOVA resulted in  $F(2, 177) = .234$ . There was not a significant difference in attendance between the three Freshman Academy cohorts ( $p = .792$ ). Table 9 shows the ANOVA results for the attendance of students participating in the Freshman Academy during three years.

Table 9

*ANOVA Results for Attendance of Freshman Academy Students 2013-2014, 2014-2015, & 2015-2016*

	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
Between Groups	.015	2	.008	.234	.792
Within Groups	5.758	177	.033		
Total	5.773	179			

**Discipline referrals.** Students who participate in the Freshman Academy are expected to have fewer than three discipline referrals during the course of the year. The number of discipline referrals for each cohort of Freshman Academy students was compared for the three years: 2013-2014 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 6.5$ ), 2014-2015 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 3.3$ ), and 2015-2016 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 4.8$ ). The ANOVA resulted in  $F(2, 177) = 1.211$ . There was not a significant difference in the number of discipline referrals between the three Freshman Academy cohorts ( $p = .300$ ). Table 10 shows the ANOVA results for the number of discipline referrals of students participating in the Freshman Academy during three years.

Table 10

*ANOVA Results for Discipline of Freshman Academy Students 2013-2014, 2014-2015, & 2015-2016*

	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
Between Groups	3.011	2	1.506	1.211	.300
Within Groups	219.967	177	1.243		
Total	222.978	179			

**SOL scores.** Students in the Freshman Academy are expected to earn a passing score of at least 400 or higher on the Algebra I, Biology or Earth Science, and World Geography SOL assessments. The SOL scores for each cohort of Freshman Academy students were compared for the three years: Algebra I, 2013-2014 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 399$ ), 2014-2015 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 394$ ), and 2015-2016 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 399$ ); World Geography, 2013-2014 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 404$ ), 2014-2015 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 397$ ), and 2015-2016 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 415$ ).

There was not a significant difference in the Algebra I SOL scores between the three Freshman Academy cohorts ( $p = .504$ ). World Geography SOL scores were highest during 2015-2016,  $F(2, 177) = 3.343$ . In contrast to other scores, there was a significant difference in the World Geography scores between the three Freshman Academy cohorts ( $p = .038$ ). Tukey post-hoc results indicated a significant difference in World Geography SOL scores between the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 cohorts. Scores for the World Geography SOL showed a 17-point increase from Year 2 to Year 3.

ANOVA could not be conducted on Earth Science and Biology SOL scores due to the nature of the assessments. While both tests are science SOL assessments, they measure different content and skills. During 2013-2014 and 2014-2015, Freshman Academy students took the Biology SOL and during 2015-2016, Freshman Academy students took the Earth Science SOL. Table 11 shows the descriptive statistics for the Algebra I SOL scores; Table 12 shows the descriptive statistics for the World Geography SOL scores; and Table 13 shows the results of the Tukey post-hoc test for the World Geography SOL scores for the three Freshman Academy cohorts during three years.

Table 11

*ANOVA Results for Algebra I SOL Scores of Freshman Academy Students 2013-2014, 2014-2015, & 2015-2016*

	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
Between Groups	1240.344	2	620.172	.687	.504
Within Groups	159733.183	177	902.447		
Total	160973.528	179			



Table 12

*ANOVA Results for World Geography SOL Scores of Freshman Academy Students 2013-2014, 2014-2015, & 2015-2016*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	8954.344	2	4477.172	3.343	.038
Within Groups	237064.383	177	1339.347		
Total	246018.728	179			

Table 13

*Tukey Post-hoc Results for World Geography Scores of Freshman Academy Students 2013-2014, 2014-2015, & 2015-2016*

Group	Group	Mean Difference	Std. Error	95% Confidence Level	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
2013-2014	2014-2015	6.42	6.68	-9.38	22.2
	2015-2016	-10.7	6.68	-26.5	5.11
2014-2015	2013-2014	-6.42	6.68	-22.2	9.38
	2015-2016	-17.1*	6.68	-32.9	-1.31
2015-2016	2013-2014	10.7	6.68	-5.11	26.5
	2014-2015	17.1*	6.68	1.31	32.9

\* $p < .05$ .

**Credits earned.** Students in the Freshman Academy are expected to earn at least five standard units of credit by the end of their ninth grade year to be considered a sophomore. Credits earned for each cohort of Freshman Academy students were compared for the three years: 2013-2014 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 5.5$ ), 2014-2015 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 6.1$ ), and 2015-2016 ( $N = 60$ ,  $M = 5.6$ ). Credits earned for students in the Freshman Academy

were highest during 2014-2015,  $F(2, 177) = 3.318$ . There was a significant difference in credits earned between the three Freshman Academy cohorts ( $p = .038$ ). Tukey post-hoc results indicated a significant difference in credits earned between the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 cohorts. Credits earned showed a 0.60-point increase from Year 1 to Year 2. Table 14 shows the descriptive statistics for credits earned and Table 15 shows the results of the Tukey post-hoc test for the three FA cohorts of students participating in the Freshman Academy during three years.

Table 14

*ANOVA Results for Credits Earned by Freshman Academy Students 2013-2014, 2014-2015, & 2015-2016*

	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
Between Groups	13.053	2	6.526	3.318	.038
Within Groups	348.175	177	1.967		
Total	361.228	179			

Table 15

*Tukey Post-hoc Results of Credits Earned by Freshman Academy Students 2013-2014, 2014-2015, & 2015-2016*

Group		Mean Difference	Std. Error	95% Confidence Level	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
2013-2014	2014-2015	-.608*	.256	-1.21	-.003
	2015-2016	-.083	.256	-.689	.522
2014-2015	2013-2014	.608*	.256	-.003	1.21
	2015-2016	.525	.256	-.080	1.13
2015-2016	2013-2014	.083	.256	-.522	.689
	2014-2015	-.525	.256	-1.13	.080

\* $p < .05$ .

### Evaluation Question 2

Is there a statistically significant difference between the proportion of Freshman Academy students and non-Academy ninth grade students in terms of intended benchmark outcomes, including: GPA of at least 2.0; 90% attendance or higher; fewer than three discipline referrals; passing scores on the Algebra 1, Biology or Earth Science, and World Geography EOC assessments; and the completion of at least five standard units of credit?

Independent-samples t-tests were conducted with the significance level set at  $p < .05$  to compare the benchmark outcomes for Freshman Academy students and for Non-Freshman Academy (Non-Freshman Academy students during 2013-2014, 2014-2015, and 2015-2016).

**GPA.** T-test results show there was a statistically significant difference in GPA between the Freshman Academy and Non-Freshman Academy students during the 3 years included in this study. Freshman Academy students had a lower mean GPA

compared to the Non-Freshman Academy students during the 3 years. Table 16 provides descriptive statistics and results of the t-test for Freshman Academy students compared to Non-Freshman Academy students on GPA over three years.

Table 16

*Descriptive Statistics and t-test Results Comparing GPA of Freshman Academy (FA) and Non-Freshman Academy (Non-FA) Students*

Year	Group	N	Mean	SD	95% Confidence Interval		t	df
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
2013-2014	FA	60	1.94	.638				
	Non-FA	231	2.64	.938	.454	.958	5.51*	289
2014-2015	FA	60	2.14	.678				
	Non-FA	244	2.68	.933	.286	.790	4.20*	302
2015-2016	FA	60	1.85	.692				
	Non-FA	225	2.63	.964	.527	1.05	5.93*	283

\* $p < .05$ .

**Attendance.** T-test results show there was not a statistically significant difference in attendance between the Freshman Academy and Non-Freshman Academy students during the 3 years included in this study. Table 17 provides descriptive statistics and results of the t-test for Freshman Academy students compared to Non-Freshman Academy students on attendance over three years.

Table 17

*Descriptive Statistics and t-test Results Comparing Attendance of Freshman Academy (FA) and Non-Freshman Academy Students (Non-FA)*

Year	Group	N	Mean	SD	95% Confidence Interval		t	df
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
2013-2014	FA	60	87.6	.105				
	Non-FA	231	89.2	.135	-.021	.052	.826	289
2014-2015	FA	60	88.2	.201				
	Non-FA	244	90.5	.112	-.015	.061	1.19	302
2015-2016	FA	60	86.0	.215				
	Non-FA	225	91.0	.152	.002	.098	2.06	283

**Discipline referrals.** T-test results show there was not a statistically significant difference in discipline referrals between the Freshman Academy students and Non-Freshman Academy students during the 3 years included in this study. Table 18 provides descriptive statistics and results of the t-test for Freshman Academy students compared to Non-Freshman Academy students on discipline referrals over three years.

Table 18

*Descriptive Statistics and t-test Results Discipline Referrals of Freshman Academy (FA) and Non-Freshman Academy (Non-FA) Students*

Year	Group	N	Mean	SD	95% Confidence Interval		t	df
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
2013-2014	FA	60	6.5	1.22				
	Non-FA	231	4.4	.130	-.574	.157	-1.12	289
2014-2015	FA	60	3.3	.933				
	Non-FA	244	4.1	1.29	-.275	.420	.410	302
2015-2016	FA	60	4.8	1.17				
	Non-FA	225	4.2	1.36	-.441	.318	-.317	283

**SOL scores.** T-test results show there was a statistically significant difference in Algebra I SOL scores between the Freshman Academy students and Non-Freshman Academy students during 2013-2014 and 2014-2015. Table 19 provides descriptive statistics and results of the t-test for Freshman Academy students compared to Non-Freshman Academy students for Algebra I SOL scores over three years.

Table 19

*Descriptive Statistics and t-test Results Comparing Algebra I SOL Scores of Freshman Academy (FA) and Non-Freshman Academy (Non-FA) Students*

Year	Group	N	Mean	SD	95% Confidence Interval		t	df
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
2013-2014	FA	60	399	25.7				
	Non-FA	231	423	43.7	12.2	35.4	4.04*	289
2014-2015	FA	60	394	35.9				
	Non-FA	244	406	38.5	1.97	23.5	2.33*	302
2015-2016	FA	60	399	27.5				
	Non-FA	225	405	36.9	-4.63	15.5	1.06	283

\* $p < .05$ .

Ninth grade students at Morrison took the Biology SOL test until 2014-2015. They began taking the Earth Science SOL test during 2015-2016. T-test results show there was a statistically significant difference in Biology SOL scores between the Freshman Academy students and Non-Freshman Academy students during 2013-2014 and 2014-2015. Freshman Academy students had a higher mean on the Biology SOL during 2013-2014. There was a statistically significant difference in Earth Science scores between Freshman Academy students and Non-Freshman Academy students in 2015-2016 with Non-Freshman Academy students scoring higher. Table 20 provides descriptive statistics and results of the t-test for Biology SOL scores for Freshman Academy students compared to Non-Freshman Academy students over two years. Table 21 provides descriptive statistics and results of the t-test for Earth Science SOL scores for Freshman Academy students compared to Non-Freshman Academy students over one year. The Non-Freshman Academy students scored higher.

Table 20

*Descriptive Statistics and t-test Results Comparing Biology SOL Scores of Freshman Academy (FA) and Non-Freshman Academy (Non-FA) Students*

Year	Group	N	Mean	SD	95% Confidence Interval		t	df
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
2013-2014	FA	60	402	36.4				
	Non-FA	231	418	56.1	.136	30.2	1.99*	289
2014-2015	FA	60	392	40.5				
	Non-FA	244	425	48.6	19.0	45.7	4.77*	302

\* $p < .05$

Table 21

*Descriptive Statistics and t-test Results Comparing Earth Science SOL Scores of Freshman Academy (FA) and Non-Freshman Academy (Non-FA) Students*

Year	Group	N	Mean	SD	95% Confidence Interval		t	df
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
2015-2016	FA	60	394	30.2				
	Non-FA	225	408	40.4	2.47	24.5	2.41*	283

\* $p < .05$

T-test results showed a statistically significant difference in World Geography SOL scores between the Freshman Academy students and Non-Freshman Academy students during 2013-2014 and 2014-2015. However, there was not a statistically significant difference in World Geography SOL scores between Freshman Academy students and Non-Freshman Academy students in 2015-2016. Students in the Freshman Academy had higher means for the World Geography SOL during 2013-2014 and 2014-



2015. Freshman Academy students also had a higher mean for the World Geography SOL than the Non-Freshman Academy students during 2015-2016. Table 22 provides descriptive statistics and results of the t-test for World Geography SOL scores for Freshman Academy students compared to Non-Freshman Academy students over three years.

Table 22

*Descriptive Statistics and t-test Results Comparing World Geography SOL Scores of Freshman Academy (FA) and Non-Freshman Academy (Non-FA) Students*

Year	Group	N	Mean	SD	95% Confidence Interval		t	df
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
2013-2014	FA	60	404	28.6				
	Non-FA	231	421	45.7	4.78	29.2	2.74*	289
2014-2015	FA	60	397	42.0				
	Non-FA	244	412	41.1	2.55	26.0	2.40*	302
2015-2016	FA	60	415	37.9				
	Non-FA	225	414	44.4	-12.6	12.0	-.044	283

\* $p < .05$

**Credits earned.** T-test results showed a statistically significant difference in credits earned between the Freshman Academy students and Non-Freshman Academy students during the 3 years included in this study. Non-Freshman Academy on average earned more credits than Freshman Academy students in all three years. However, students in the Freshman Academy exceeded the mean for credits earned during the 3 years and earned the most credits during 2014-2015. Table 23 provides descriptive statistics and results of the t-test for credits earned for Freshman Academy students compared to Non-Freshman Academy students over three years.

Table 23

*Descriptive Statistics and t-test Results Comparing Credits Earned by Freshman Academy (FA) and Non-Freshman Academy (Non-FA) Students*

Year	Group	N	Mean	SD	95% Confidence Interval		t	df
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
2013-2014	FA	60	5.5	1.39				
	Non-FA	231	7.2	2.27	1.04	2.25	5.36*	289
2014-2015	FA	60	6.1	1.33				
	Non-FA	244	7.0	1.85	.419	1.42	3.62*	302
2015-2016	FA	60	5.6	1.48				
	Non-FA	225	7.4	1.90	1.32	2.40	6.95*	283

\* $p < .05$ .

### Evaluation Question 3

What are the perceptions of teachers, school counselors, and administrators regarding the influence of the transition program on students' GPA, attendance, discipline, SOL scores, and credits earned?

Individual, formal, semi-structured interviews provided qualitative data for the study and included six general and special education teachers, three school counselors, and three administrators as participants. The general and special education teachers were selected based on their interaction with ninth-grade students as instructors over the last three years at Morrison High School. The three school counselors were selected because each one works with a certain group of ninth grade students as part of his or her caseload at Morrison High School. The three administrators were selected because each one has worked or currently works as the ninth grade administrator at Morrison High School.

Each participant was asked the same eight interview questions (Appendix C) and at least one of four follow-up questions to clarify additional information regarding his or her perspective of the Freshman Academy. The individual interviews served as the primary source of data for Evaluation Question 3.

**Emergent themes and codes from interviews.** A total of 220 codes grouped into 15 themes emerged from the individual interview transcripts and notes. Participants responded based on their perceptions of the influence of the transition program on students' GPA, attendance, discipline, SOL scores, and credits earned. The extensive list of emergent codes and themes was narrowed into a final list of 34 codes, grouped into 12 themes aligned with each question (Student Failure, Student Success, Strong Foundation, Critical Indicators, Positive Relationships, Low Expectations, Student Improvement, Communication and Collaboration, Consistency, Reviewing Information, Meaningful Feedback and Data Driven). During the interviews, the participants responded to each question by sharing their perceptions of the Freshman Academy. Table 24 illustrates the themes and codes that were derived from teachers', school counselors', and administrators' interviews.

Table 24

*Themes and Codes for Perceived Influence of Transition Program on Student Outcomes*

<b>Emergent Theme</b>	<b>Emergent Code</b>
Student Failure	Maturity level Lack of preparedness Attendance and behavior issues
Student Success	On-time graduation Good study habits Positive interaction Self-motivation
Strong Foundation	Academically Socially Prepared On-track
Critical Indicators	Success Promotion Expectations
Positive Relationships	Extra reinforcement Support Positive bonds
Low Expectations	Previous failures Attendance issues Lack of parental involvement Outside factors
Student Improvement	Motivation Peer collaboration Student success Mentorships
Communication and Collaboration	Seamless transition Partnerships with schools Partnerships with parents
Consistency	Measure Data
Reviewing Information	Documentation School Focus plan
Meaningful Feedback Data Driven	Student improvement Multiple data sources

**Prior concerns.** What were the concerns of the teachers, school counselors, and administrators prior to implementation of the Freshman Academy?

*Student failure.* Student failure emerged as a theme based on the concerns of the transition team prior to the implementation of the Freshman Academy. Three codes relating to this theme emerged from analysis of the transcripts and notes from interviews. All of the interview participants were mainly concerned with students' "level of immaturity" and "lack of preparedness" when they enter high school. Based on the history of incoming freshman, students have a "middle school mindset" and can sometimes have difficulty grasping the concept of what is expected in high school. Teachers were also concerned with students' "lack of preparedness for high school" regarding their study habits and motivation for completing assignments.

Teachers felt that freshman students typically had "more attendance and behavior issues" than the upperclassmen, so teachers felt they needed to address these concerns to help ninth graders achieve success. Participating school counselors believed that students would have more "freedom" in high school because middle school seemed to be more structured.

Three teachers, one school counselor, and one school administrator mentioned concerns related to not having implemented a transition program before and making sure they were doing it correctly. Two of the teachers were concerned with the staff buy-in to implement a successful Freshman Academy. Some staff members did not understand why only a selection of ninth graders needed to be part of a program. They wanted every ninth grader who showed some sign of struggle to be a part of the program. Administrators explained that the program would begin with 60 students to better monitor the program; however, this is the total number the team has maintained each year. The staff knew of one other high school in the district that had a relatively strong

freshman transition program, but the staff wanted to make sure that the Freshman Academy would continue to develop over time.

One of the concerns prior to the implementation of the Freshman Academy was the difficulty that many ninth graders were having with passing the Algebra I SOL. Three teachers, two school counselors, and two administrators expressed the need to address the issues students were having with math before they came to high school by reviewing the SOL test data and other information that could help with scheduling and support throughout the year. Students were entering Morrison at a point where they “just weren’t quite ready” for Algebra. The state expects most students to complete Algebra I by the eighth grade, but the early push can cause high schools to miss accreditation benchmarks if certain strategies such as double-block classes and tutoring are not implemented throughout ninth grade. The Freshman Academy was designed to increase Algebra I readiness and the SOL pass rate.

The following quotations illustrate some of the concerns interview participants had prior to the implementation of the Freshman Academy:

Teacher #4: *“The math failure rate of eighth graders, students not keeping up with responsibilities, and their grades suffering while they try to find their place in high school.”*

Teacher #5: *“They don’t understand the value of getting something done right away, or if they miss a day they need to realize that they have to come back and get their work done immediately.”*

School counselor #2: *“Sometimes there are issues with having additional responsibilities like walking to class by themselves; the 5 minutes they have to get to class is something they are not accustomed to.”*

School administrator #3: *“Students knowing how high school is different from middle school. They honestly think they can fail and still be a 10th grader if they just show up to school daily in ninth grade.”*

**Goals, priorities, and values.** What are the goals, priorities, and values of the Freshman Academy?

***Student success.*** Student success emerged as the main theme during the analysis of the interview transcripts and notes. Nine of the 12 interview participants stated that student success was the primary goal of the Freshman Academy. This is why the program was designed. This theme was evident as the interview participants expressed what drives the program. Overall, the participants highlighted the ultimate goal is “on-time graduation.” Improving attendance for ninth grade students is a continuous goal of the Freshman Academy. Participants believe that attendance rates are higher for these students because the students see the value in coming to school every day. Four teachers shared that Morrison was not seeing successful outcomes from the students who were coming into the school with many deficits. Teachers and administrators felt something needed to change. Some of the priorities consist of “teaching students study habits,” and “helping students manage classes, workload, and time.” Several teachers repeatedly mentioned “good study habits” as an important factor in helping students achieve.

In addition, being able to “provide tutorials after school for students” and “promoting students to the 10th grade” are considered priorities. Showing students how

to “positively interact with each other and the staff” was a value shared by two teachers and a school counselor. Integrating opportunities for “social interaction” is another priority of the program. Students in the Freshman Academy have multiple opportunities throughout the year to interact during a variety of activities and field trips. During mentorship meetings, time is allotted for an activity that helps to build their social skills and promote “positive interaction” with other students and adults. Two school counselors and two administrators stated that the students have experienced success over time because they have become “self-motivated.”

The following quotations illustrate some of the goals, priorities, and values of the Freshman Academy:

Teacher #4: *“The priorities are to make sure the freshmen don’t fall behind, because once they do they feel like they can’t catch up—that creates a cycle.”*

Teacher #6: *“[The] number one goal is student achievement—we want them to be successful, do well in their classes, and pass their SOLs. We also want them to feel involved, be part of the community, participate in clubs or activities, and understand that they have resources and support within the school building.”*

School counselor #1: *“The goal is to ensure students are College, Career, and Citizen-ready. It is our job to prepare them for college or the workplace.”*

School counselor #2: *“We value how we support the students. The opportunities provided through the Freshman Academy ensure students have the support that they need.”*

School administrator #1: *“The main goal is for 100% of the freshman cohort to be promoted to the next grade and earn 5 or more credits.”*



**Specific activities or strategies.** Why were the specific activities or strategies selected as part of the Freshman Academy? Would you speak to the components that you think make the biggest difference?

***Strong foundation.*** Eight of the 12 interview participants stated that the specific activities or strategies were selected as part of the Freshman Academy because they wanted students to have a strong foundation “academically and socially.” They wanted the students to have a variety of activities or strategies to “support their needs” as students entering high school for the first time with some deficits.

Three teachers shared that they really like the concept of Homework Club and IOU Café because students get “an opportunity to complete assignments” without being penalized. Two teachers expressed a past concern with the IOU Café when it was not always as structured as it is now. Now more teachers check on the students while they are in IOU Café because they want to make sure it is being implemented with a little more structure. When teachers come by the classroom to check on the students, they can make sure students are receiving the assignments and they can assist them by answering any questions the students may have.

Four of the teachers, two of the school counselors, and all three of the administrators mentioned double-block classes as being a component that have made the biggest difference for the students. Double-block classes have allowed students to meet every day because “extra time is needed” to really “master a concept” for students who have difficulty in math or reading. Town hall meetings were also mentioned by these nine participants. Town hall meetings give students an opportunity to sit “collectively as a class” to hear about their grades, available resources, and expectations.

Three teachers, all of the school counselors, and one school administrator stated that Grade Recovery is a “critical component” that has assisted students with being promoted to 10th grade. Three teachers, one school counselor, and one school administrator shared how much they liked the mentoring opportunities available to the students. The mentorship activities and field trips allow students to “explore their interests and talents” and help them “define a path for possible careers.” These components were selected because the teachers, school counselors, and administrators felt they would provide “multiple opportunities” for students to build a strong foundation and “stay on track” before going to 10th grade.

The following quotations illustrate some of the specific activities or strategies selected as part of the Freshman Academy:

Teacher #1: *“The mentorship programs are important because not all [students] have role models outside of the building.”*

Teacher #2: *“The component that has made the biggest difference is the Town Hall meeting; I love them! I love that each class goes into a meeting where they talk about their successes and their failures and their behaviors. Everybody is in there at the same time and they are all looking at the same information instead of a counselor pulling a kid and telling them this information. I do think that the Town Hall meeting is a big plus. Kudos for the Town Hall meetings!”*

School counselor #3: *“The mentoring groups—Dream Girls, Men on the Move—help with building character and, of course, if they feel involved in something it helps to increase their attendance because they have something to look forward to when they come to school besides just going to classes.”*

School administrator #2: *“You have to check the data and ask certain questions to see if students really need a double-block English or math class. You want to be sure the schedule allows for reinforcement and flexibility to help freshman become successful.”*

**Academic outcomes.** What are your perceptions of the academic outcomes in regard to GPA, attendance, discipline, Standards of Learning assessments, and credits earned of students participating in the Freshman Academy?

**Critical indicators.** Six of the 12 interview participants mentioned that the academic outcomes or “critical indicators” specifically drove the high expectations at Morrison. The school division expects students to be College, Career, and Citizen-ready and the school staff “expects nothing less” for the students in the Freshman Academy. Three teachers and two school counselors stated that on-time graduation is the “ultimate goal” for all of the students and the academic outcomes set the students “up for success.” Four teachers, one school counselor, and two administrators felt the most important academic outcome was attendance.

Attendance is a “critical step” to getting quality instruction and being promoted to the 10th grade. Ultimately, students in the Freshman Academy have “smaller class sizes” and “more resources” compared to their peers outside of the Freshman Academy. Five teachers and two administrators stated that they were “relentless” and “optimistic” about student performance and keeping students in school. Overall, the interview participants felt that the academic outcomes provided standards for students as they help to measure academic and behavioral achievement. According to the interviewed participants, Freshman Academy students do not want to get in trouble. They do not like to stay after

school or be suspended because of inappropriate behavior. One school counselor and a school administrator had experienced firsthand students getting very upset because they have to miss an activity due to a disciplinary issue.

During the interviews, the teachers and school counselors mentioned that students have the support to meet the high expectations that are expected of them. Students are provided with time to meet with their teachers and counselors to ask questions or discuss any concerns they may have. Students' academic outcomes are part of the data conversations at every monthly team meeting. During each meeting, teachers, the school counselor, and administrators discuss how students are performing based on the academic outcomes. At the end of the semester, the team reviews GPA and credit reports to make sure all of the students are meeting expectations. The goal is for each student to earn a GPA of at least 2.0 and at least 2.5-3.5 credits. The Freshman Academy teachers meet weekly during common planning to review grades, attendance, and discipline. The freshman lead teacher and school administrator meet as well to discuss how the students are performing in regard to all of the outcomes.

Two teachers spoke about SOL scores during their interviews because of the important role they play in graduation. Students must pass at least three SOL assessments during their freshman year. The teachers stated how important it was for students to pass their SOLs the first time and be on the "right path toward graduation." If students are not meeting these goals, then conferences are held with students and parents to look for ways to improve student performance. Three of the teachers and two of the school counselors felt that when students see improvement concerning their academic outcomes, they become more "motivated" and are willing to accept more "challenges."

The following quotations illustrate some of the perceptions of the academic outcomes of students participating in the Freshman Academy:

Teacher #1: *“The student outcomes work hand-in-hand; attendance drives grades and grades drive behavior.”*

Teacher #2: *“GPA is important; you have to be here to get the instruction; discipline drives motivation and focus. We believe all of these things are important to our students’ success.”*

School counselor #1: *“I know that attendance is linked to student achievement. Students want to be here. We provide the necessary support for them to get a good GPA, stay out of trouble, and pass their SOL tests. Ultimately, the goal is to earn enough credits to graduate on time.”*

School counselor #2: *“Students have performed better since FA [Freshman Academy] started, SOL scores for [World Geography] have been on the rise, [there are fewer] discipline infractions, attendance has been better.”*

School administrator #3: *“For the credits, our goal was to make sure that every Freshman Academy student had five credits and hopefully pass[ed] English and math. We have been getting more students to pass and have enough credits for 10th grade. I think it worked well.”*

**Contributions to success.** What do you think most contributes to the positive student outcomes for students in the academy?

**Positive relationships.** The theme positive relationships emerged from analysis of the transcripts and notes from the interviews. Four of the teachers and three of the school counselors elaborated on how important it was to build positive relationships with

students to help them achieve. According to these participants, establishing positive relationships with the students in the Freshman Academy provides “extra reinforcement” and students can see that their teachers really “care about them.” Having smaller classes for the Freshman Academy students allows for more “one-on-one interaction,” allows teachers to see “how students learn best,” and allows for teachers and students to form “positive bonds” with one another. One teacher shared that students felt “special” because they were getting a “little more attention” than their peers.

The Freshman Academy is designed to encourage students not only to have positive relationships with their teachers, but also with their peers, school counselors, administrators, and other staff at Morrison. Two of the school counselors shared that it was important to set a “positive tone” to motivate students’ desire to learn. One school administrator felt that building positive relationships with the students made getting them to work harder a much easier task. According to the administrator, if “students believe you want them to do well, they will.” Two of the teachers discussed being positive “role models” for the students and encouraging positive behavior. One teacher was quite adamant when she stated, “Don’t expect students to be positive, if you aren’t giving them the same exact vibe.”

The following quotations illustrate what may contribute to the positive student outcomes for students in the academy.

Teacher #3: *“I think just knowing that we care and that we have so many things available for students to help them achieve success. Knowing that there is a cushion, at least the first year, is important when they are transitioning.”*

Teacher #4: *“The faculty and staff have established positive relationships with the students in the Freshman Academy. They want them to succeed.”*

School counselor #2: *“I think that the relationships that students have with their teachers and their counselors are very, very important. As a former teacher, I know that if a kid really has a good relationship with you or feels like you support them or [have] their best interest at heart, they will really work hard for you and try to do the very best that they can to make you happy.”*

School administrator #3: *“If you have support from a coach that’s pushing you to do well, or a teacher you have a relationship with, students in the Academy tend to do better. All of the teachers have the same kids for the most part in the Academy, so it’s easier to establish those positive relationships and provide support.”*

**Barriers.** What do you think are the barriers to students achieving the intended outcomes of the program?

**Low expectations.** Several interview participants focused on students having low expectations regarding performance as the main reason why some students do not achieve the intended outcomes of the Freshman Academy. Low expectations emerged as the theme from the responses. Five teachers, two school counselors, and two administrators explained that many of the students talk about failing so many quizzes and assignments during the previous years that it became a “natural thing to do.” Several students also shared with their teachers and school counselors that previous failures occurred because they did not care about coming to school regularly. Four teachers and two school counselors mentioned that sometimes because of previous failures in elementary or middle school, students find it difficult to believe they can be successful. Some of the

students tend to speak negatively about their achievement. They have shared with teachers and school counselors that they do not believe “school is for them” and that they do not see the point of staying in school. Two of the teachers expressed that this is the reason why the Freshman Academy exists. The transition team’s job is to motivate students, provide support, as well as the tools to help them accomplish their goals.

Several interview participants stated that “attendance and discipline problems” could become barriers to students achieving the intended outcomes of the programs. Participants felt that when students do not come to school on a regular basis, they cannot learn. Several participants shared that it was difficult for students to engage in the classroom environment and during activities when they first entered high school because they were not motivated to learn. However, once students began to attend individual conferences with their teachers and school counselor, and attend mentorships and Town Hall meetings, they began to feel motivated to achieve. Two teachers felt that students who are not motivated to fulfill their responsibilities as a student and take advantage of the opportunities made available to them will have difficulty achieving the intended outcomes.

Three teachers shared their belief that the students’ had barriers because of the lack of support at home. There was not a “push from parents” at home to keep the students focused. In addition, three teachers, one school counselor, and two administrators shared frustrations they had experienced with the lack of support from a few parents. When parents are not involved, students do not perform. Sometimes there are just some things that are “out of the students’ control” that can be barriers. One teacher, school counselor, and school administrator expressed that parents expect students



to take care of younger siblings sometimes before and after school. This extra responsibility can prevent students from getting homework completed. It can also keep students from participating in certain activities or events after school. Interview participants also felt that outside factors such as negative neighborhood activity can affect student achievement and keep them from being successful.

The following quotations illustrate some of the barriers participants shared related to students achieving the intended outcomes of the Freshman Academy.

Teacher #1: *“The negative self-talk is a big issue with them not being successful because they are downing themselves and counting themselves out before they even start.”*

Teacher #6: *“I think you can set up a program but if you don’t have kids participating or willing to do their part, it’s going to affect the program in a negative manner. I think students not coming to school on a regular basis [has a negative effect].”*

School counselor #3: *“I think that if they are here daily, keeping a log, and doing everything they are supposed to be doing in the program, then I don’t see how they aren’t successful. There are so many resources and so many ways for them to make up assignments—there’s always a way to recover.”*

School administrator #1: *“Some of the barriers are things that we cannot help—socioeconomic status, siblings. I hear it all the time, the students can’t stay after because they have to do other things like pick up younger siblings, babysit, or work. When we are trying to provide for kids after school, things like this become the biggest barriers.”*

**Positive effects.** What are the most positive effects of the Freshman Academy?

***Student improvement.*** The interview participants believed that student improvement is the most positive effect of the Freshman Academy. The program is intended to assist students in achieving academic and behavioral success. Student improvement emerged as the overall theme as I listened to the interview transcripts and reviewed my notes. Three of the teachers shared that once students realize the transition team of teachers, school counselors, and administrators support them, they become motivated about learning, and they put forth more effort toward their achievement. One of the school counselors shared that most of the students that participate in the program are easily motivated, but the structure of the program helps to encourage other students to want to do well. Five teachers and one school counselor spoke about various meetings with students to keep them engaged: program planning sessions, mentorships, tutoring sessions.

Three teachers, one school counselor, and one school administrator shared their excitement when they discussed the positive changes they see in students when they are provided with opportunities to collaborate with their peers. “Peer collaboration” is stressed in every class and every activity. One teachers stated that she “believes when students get to work together, it motivates them to work harder.”

“Student success” was repeated throughout several interviews as a positive effect of the Freshman Academy. Several interview participants felt that students are concerned about homework and good grades. They are checking online and discussing their grades with their teachers. Teachers reported seeing more students concerned about their achievement. Students know achievement is important because the Freshman

Academy culture emphasizes the importance of doing well. One school counselor mentioned seeing a “reduction in anxiety” as a positive effect of the Freshman Academy. Students tend to be “more in control” and are not worried as much as they used to be when they entered ninth grade.

Five interview participants discussed how the mentorship activities have positively impacted the students in the Freshman Academy because students have “positive role models” in and out of the school. The students want to “be just like” some of the adults they are around. The interview participants also shared there are fewer “students dropping out” because of the resources and support made available by the Freshman Academy. Four interview participants shared how the Town Hall meetings provide students with information about their cohort. As one teacher stated, “The students didn’t even know what a cohort was before they came to Morrison.” The Freshman Academy team emphasizes the importance of “staying on track” and “graduating on time” with the rest of their peers.

The following quotations illustrate some of the positive effects of the Freshman Academy:

Teacher #3: *“I think just knowing that we care and that we have so many things available for students to help them achieve success. Knowing that there is a cushion, at least the first year, is important when they are transitioning [into high school].”*

Teacher #5: *“The most positive effect would be the child’s knowledge of where they are as far as their grades, their attendance, what’s expected of them with discipline, even having the mentorship group. Things like that will move a class forward*

*together so that way we have higher graduation rates. I think implementing this program really let[s] kids see that there's value in their education."*

School counselor #1: *I think the team concept. There's an administrator working with the students, a counselor, and a ninth grade Graduation Coach. Everybody pulls together, meets with the students, shares the expectations and goals, talks with the parents about the program. Everybody is on board and on the same page."*

School administrator #1: *"The camaraderie and the leadership that the students begin to develop as the year goes on. They are given various leadership tasks through the Freshman Academy. I've really seen some leaders develop, like a Phoenix rising, because I never saw it coming."*

**Areas for improvement.** What are the areas in which you would like to see the Freshman Academy improve? Do you have ideas for how those improvements might be implemented? Are there additional activities or strategies that you would like to see implemented in the Freshman Academy?

**Communication and collaboration.** All of the teachers, one school counselor, and all of the administrators spoke at length about the need to "communicate and collaborate" with various groups to continue developing a strong transition program. Several participants shared the importance of meeting with the middle school teams to "discuss the expectations of high school" in general. Morrison has ninth graders entering from four feeder schools. The Freshman Academy team expressed a willingness to make the experience of ninth graders entering high school a "seamless transition." Currently, only the school counselors from Morrison meets with the feeder middle schools during February each year to discuss schedules and the best placement for students. The current

ninth grade administrator stated that it is important for the entire team to meet with the middle school and have put plans in place to develop this important next step.

Two teachers and one administrator shared that in previous meetings there has been a discussion about visiting other high schools that have a similar program for ninth graders. The Freshman Academy team would see what is working and what is not working from the perspective of other established programs. They felt the experience could open the door for even more partnerships that would allow them to improve the transition process for students. One teacher stated that the team is striving for “continuous growth and progress.”

Six of the teachers, one school counselor and two administrators articulated how much they need parents to be involved with their student’s transition to high school. They want parents to be involved with the Freshman Academy to see what their student is learning and how their student is improving. The participants also talked quite a bit about establishing “partnerships with parents” and how they are a big part of their student’s success. Three teachers and one school counselor focused on providing more evening activities for parents and even making home visits to communicate with parents that cannot make it to Morrison.

The participants shared that they will need to meet to discuss a plan for developing or improving the various partnerships and implementing the various strategies

The following quotations illustrate some of the improvements, activities, or strategies the team would like to see in the Freshman Academy.

Teacher #2: *“Right now, I’m happy with everything that we do. It might be nice to do some follow up activities at the end of the students’ ninth grade year or the beginning of their sophomore year to see what they are doing in that first quarter. We want to make sure they stay on track.”*

Teacher #4: *“We can have a conversation with eighth grade teachers about homework and high school prep—the importance of getting assignments in on time, and just what to expect when they get to high school.”*

Teacher #5: *“One of the things that I’ve done this year and for the past few years is to invite parents to my classroom. I want parents to be involved with the activities that I have in my classroom. I want parents to see their student making progress and doing well in school.”*

School counselor #1: *“I think that would be a good thing if eighth and ninth grade teachers would communicate and discuss content and delivery of content because all kids learn, just in different ways. That would be one important key component to add. I would like to take the students in the Freshman Academy to visit colleges, so they can get an idea of those expectations. For some of the improvements we would like to see, we could apply for grants to help with the financial obligation.”*

School administrator #2: *“We really need to have a summer camp or some other type of summer bridge program for the incoming freshman. The students in the Freshman Academy can be included in this, but they need to have special activities that highlight what the program is all about. We need to speak to central office personnel about the cost.”*

Each of the four follow-up interview questions provided additional insight concerning the Freshman Academy. The interview participants were able to share their perspective on the fidelity of the Freshman Academy, how the program is being monitored, and how students, teachers, and administrators receive feedback in the Freshman Academy. All of the interview participants were asked at least one follow-up question. The following highlights are taken from the interview transcripts and notes.

**Fidelity of implementation.** To what degree is each activity or strategy being implemented with fidelity?

**Consistency.** The theme consistency emerged from the transcripts and notes to describe how well each activity or strategy is being implemented. I asked two teachers and two administrators this question based on their experiences with the implementation of activities and strategies in the Freshman Academy. They shared a variety of ways they have been able to measure the activities and strategies including reviewing data and reports, conducting observations, discussing and analyzing student work, reviewing lesson plans, grades, and assessments during common planning, meeting with students, seeking feedback from the mentors, and talking with students who assist with tutoring. The participants also shared that each activity or strategy has not been implemented perfectly. There is always room for improvement. Two teachers shared specifically that they do not always know how well the Homework Club and FLEX periods are being implemented because they need to develop a better system for collecting consistent data.

The following quotation is from one administrator:

*“Data[analysis] drives everything we do with the Freshman Academy and helps the team to consistently implement the activities and strategies with fidelity. We*

*know that it is important to review the data for each activity and make necessary adjustments. This is definitely an area that we hope the program evaluation can assist us with.”*

**Monitoring.** How are program activities or strategies monitored?

**Reviewing information.** I asked three teachers and one school counselor this question and based on interview transcripts and notes their responses indicated that the general theme was providing documentation about the activities and strategies. The participants noted that documentation from a variety of sources including minutes from meetings, conference notes, student feedback (verbal and written), student grades, logs from tutoring, IOU Café, FLEX, etc., helps the transition team to monitor the activities and strategies. One of the most important documents that the team has is the School Focus plan. The team has included the Freshman Academy activities and strategies, a description of each, objectives, and how each one will be monitored. Another important piece that has been included in the School Focus plan is the implementation timeline. The School Focus plan is revisited each quarter and adjustments are made as necessary.

The quote below is from one teacher:

Teacher #4: *“The Freshman Academy meets monthly to discuss our activities and how well we are monitoring them. We discuss every aspect of the program, so everyone is involved with making sure students are getting the most out of every activity. We always check our School Focus plan to make sure we are doing what we said we would do. It’s important that the activities and strategies drive our students’ achievement.*



**Student feedback.** How do students receive feedback in the Freshman Academy?

**Meaningful feedback.** Two teachers and two school counselors were asked this question and they stressed the importance of meaningful feedback. They felt that students receive feedback in many forms, but they really want to know how that feedback can help them. Students can see their grades online and they like this form of instant feedback because grades are important to them. Students receive assessment data to include SOL scores from their teachers. School counselors meet with students to discuss their grades, GPA, credits, and to plan out courses for the upcoming year. Teachers provide students with feedback during class and outside of class. They want to know how they are doing in class, so teachers will give students feedback in the form of praise or constructive criticism. The response from students can be positive or negative, depending on the type of feedback it is. If a student isn't performing well in a class and the teacher has a conversation with him or her, the student may not think this is a positive situation. The teachers explained that they always have to be mindful that these students are ninth graders and may not be able to deal well with constructive criticism. The idea is to make the feedback meaningful for the student to help them improve.

The quote below is from one teacher:

Teacher #5: *“The students receive feedback in the Freshman Academy in many ways. The crazy thing is that we have embraced technology; the students can get on their phones and check their grades and they can see what things they are missing during the school day. Teachers send emails and they can send their work to Homework Club or IOU Café. Kids can come up to the computer and ask the teachers what they are missing. They can check on their grades. As far as*

*attendance is concerned, kids can check on attendance online as well and if I make a mistake they will correct me. They have the power of technology which allows them to focus on their own achievements.”*

**Teacher and administrator feedback.** How do teachers and administrators receive feedback in the Freshman Academy?

**Data driven.** Two teachers and two school administrators were asked this question and based on the transcripts and notes, data driven feedback was the underlying theme. The interview participants discussed receiving feedback based on classroom observations, during meetings with administrators, and during transition team meetings. They receive data from reports, student data (grades, assignments), and they also receive feedback from students and parents during conferences, phone calls, and even classroom observations. Sometimes, parents want to visit the classroom to check on their student’s progress or they may be interested in a particular lesson.

Administrators shared that data is provided from a number of reports about the students in the program and the teachers. They can access the student information system to check on student performance, attendance, discipline, and report cards. The administrators also receive division reports that provide feedback on how well the ninth graders are performing in the Freshman Academy.

The quote below is from one administrator:

School administrator #2: *“The ninth grade administrators attend district meetings and they are provided with information about freshmen. The district looks at the ninth graders closely. The teachers are with the kids, they know them, they see their behavior in class, so there’s two-way feedback. We started implementing stop*

*light data. It is a color-coded tracking system that helps us move students based on similar assessment data. We have been able to pinpoint where students are weak and move them with the help of various strategies that have been implemented. We have seen our numbers go up a lot by implementing things like Grade Recovery, Homework Club, and IOU cafe. Once you have that data from the interim, teachers adjust their goals or we'll discuss what is working and continue focusing on a particular area. It's all data driven."*

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 provided detail of quantitative and qualitative data results based on student outcomes and teacher, school counselor, and school administrator interviews. These data informed the three evaluation questions and provided evidence to support the impact of the Freshman Academy based on the intended outcomes of students earning at least a 2.0 GPA, attending school at least 90% of the time, receiving fewer than three discipline referrals, passing SOL tests, and earning at least five credits at the end of the school year. These data also provided additional insight regarding student success. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings further, including the implications of the successes and challenges with the Freshman Academy. In addition, implications for other school leaders implementing high school transition programs will be discussed.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions**

Transition to high school is an important, yet challenging process for ninth grade students. More attention must be given to the unique needs of ninth graders as they transition to a new school environment while also facing the challenges of adolescence (Gibson, 2006; Legters & Kerr, 2001). The transition literature highlights multiple strategies that support an effective program, including pre-high school activities and ongoing activities throughout the year (Gibson, 2006; Hertzog & Morgan, 1997; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Smith, 1997). Additionally, effective transition programs have an impact on student success, including attendance, behavior, social skills, and achievement (Gibson, 2006; Kerr, 2002; MacIver, 1990; Warren et al., 2011). Transition programs are considered effective when teams of teachers, school counselors, and school administrators plan consistently; implement specific and targeted activities for students and parents; and focus their attention on students who have difficulty academically and behaviorally (Anderson et al., 2000; Hertzog & Morgan, 1997; Warren et al., 2011).

Teachers play a critical role in transitions when they provide necessary academic and social support to address the challenges that ninth grade students may have (Akos & Galassi, 2004). When students are able to form close relationships with their teachers, this may alleviate some of the negative effects and reinforce some of the positive effects of the transition (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Benner & Graham, 2009). School counselors

can assist middle schools in the articulation of programs that can help students navigate the challenging aspects of transition to include visiting the high school prior to ninth grade; selecting the right courses; and providing information to parents (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Hertzog & Morgan, 1997). Lastly, school administrators monitor the school's progress and provide guidance to create a positive, welcoming school environment. It is also up to the school administrators to look for indicators that students are not transitioning successfully including failing grades, attendance, and discipline concerns (Anderson et al., 2000; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

Morrison High School implemented a comprehensive transition program, the Freshman Academy, to address the needs of the incoming ninth graders by developing a team consisting of teachers, school counselors, a graduation coach, and a ninth grade school administrator. The team was able to address major concerns that presented when ninth grade students entered high school. Based on the research, the team implemented activities and strategies that would ease students' concerns, get them more involved with the school, improve their achievement, ensure promotion to 10th grade, and put them on track for graduation.

During the last seven years, the team has identified 60 students each year to participate in the Freshman Academy. Student selection is based on low performance in language arts and math, attendance, discipline, and SOL scores during eighth grade. The team at Morrison recognized a need to help students have a positive transition to high school while increasing promotion and graduation rates. The Freshman Academy was tailored to support students' academic, behavioral, and social goals and equip them with the belief that they could succeed.

The purpose of this mixed-methods formative program evaluation of Morrison High School's Freshman Academy was to examine the performance of students in the Freshman Academy according to the benchmark intended outcomes; provide teachers, school counselors, and school administrators with evidence-based information on the merit, worth, and significance of the program; and to identify areas of improvement and increase sustainability utilizing the product component of Stufflebeam's revised (2003) CIPP evaluation model. Findings from this study and recommendations for the Freshman Academy are provided in this chapter.

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **Freshman Academy Achievement and Behavior Outcomes**

Analyses of the student outcome data revealed that students in each of the Freshman Academy cohorts were below the mean intended benchmarks for attendance, and Algebra I SOL scores during the three years included in this study. Students were above the mean for discipline during the three years included in this study due to the number of discipline referrals received. Data revealed students did meet the mean intended benchmark for World Geography SOL scores during 2013-2014, and exceeded the expectations for World Geography performance during 2015-2016. Students met the mean intended benchmark for GPA during 2014-2015. Students also exceeded the mean intended benchmark for credits earned during each cohort year. It appears that perhaps some components of the Freshman Academy are having some effect on student achievement. Analyses of the student outcome data did not reveal which particular activities and strategies are actually supporting student achievement or behavioral outcomes.

There was a statistically significant difference in GPA, science SOL scores, and credits earned between the Freshman Academy and Non-Freshman Academy students during the three years included in this study. There was a statistically significant difference in Algebra I SOL scores between the Freshman Academy and Non-Freshman Academy students during 2013-2014 and 2014-2015. Data analysis reveals there was not a statistically significant difference between the Freshman Academy and Non-Freshman Academy students in attendance and discipline. This shows a positive result as students in the Freshman Academy are expected to perform as well as the Non-Freshman Academy students.

Freshman Academy students performed lower than the Non-Freshman Academy students on every mean benchmark intended outcome with the exception of the World Geography SOL during 2015-2016. Further analysis reveals that outliers can skew the data. For example, when analyzing the results of the discipline data, only two or three Freshman Academy students received discipline referrals during the three years. The mean shows a stark contrast compared to the percentage of students who met the benchmark intended outcome for discipline referrals. Keeping in mind, the Freshman Academy and Non-Freshman Academy students did not start at the same point. The Freshman Academy students were selected because they had already demonstrated several risk factors.

Although the mean for the benchmark intended outcomes in most cases is lower for the Freshman Academy students than the Non-Freshman Academy students, the percentage of those students meeting certain benchmark intended outcomes is favorable as compared to the Non-Freshman Academy students and presents a different perspective

on achievement. During 2013-2014, 85% of the Freshman Academy and 88% of the Non-Freshman Academy met the benchmark for attendance; and 95% of the Freshman Academy and 97% of the Non-Freshman Academy students met the benchmark for discipline. Quantitative data analysis also revealed that 65% of students in the Freshman Academy, compared to 58% of Non-Freshman Academy students, passed the Biology SOL during 2013-2014. Seventy percent of both student groups met the benchmark for World Geography during 2013-2014. Furthermore, at least 95% of the students in the Freshman Academy have met the benchmark intended outcome for discipline during the three years included in this study. This suggests that students are demonstrating steady positive behavior, which may also help to improve classroom and school climate.

Three of the five benchmark intended outcomes are showing a positive trend based on percentages. During each of the three years included in this study, more students in the Freshman Academy are meeting the benchmark for attendance, discipline, and credits earned. More students in the Freshman Academy met the benchmark intended outcomes during 2013-2014 than the other two years analyzed in this study. Additionally, the percentage of students in the Freshman Academy who have earned credits continues to show positive growth. Seventy-eight percent of the students in the Freshman Academy earned enough credits to be promoted to 10th grade during 2015-2016. This was a 6% increase from the previous year and a 16% increase from 2013-2014. The goal for students in the Freshman Academy is to meet or exceed the benchmark intended outcomes.

Ninth grade students at Morrison took the Biology SOL until 2014-2015. The decision to change the science curriculum from Biology to Earth Science was due to the



alignment between Earth Science and the World Geography curriculum. World Geography is the social science course offering for most incoming ninth graders in the school division. Fewer students in the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 Freshman Academy cohorts have passed Biology and Earth Science. The average performance on the Biology and Earth Science SOL tests is lower for the Freshman Academy students as compared to the Non-Freshman Academy students; however, 45% of the Freshman Academy students passed the Earth Science SOL during the first year of administration in 2015-2016.

### **Perceptions of Freshman Academy Team**

Participants' interviews revealed that prior to the implementation of the Freshman Academy, the staff were concerned with students' overall transition to high school, but were mainly concerned about student failure. The Freshman Academy team was specifically concerned about students not passing the Algebra I SOL. The staff determined that the students were not ready for Algebra I based on their eighth grade SOL performance, but the state expectations of completing Algebra I by eighth grade proved to be even more of a challenge for many students entering ninth grade. Students were entering ninth grade with deficits in math and reading, causing the school division to provide double dosing of classes. The interview participants discovered that students with poor math and reading skills were overwhelmed by the academic demands of high school (Neild, 2009). Unlike Algebra I, students do not take a Reading SOL until 11th grade, which gives them more time to prepare. It is important to note that more students in the Freshman Academy (57%) passed the Algebra I SOL during 2015-2016, which was a 12% increase from the previous year. This suggests that students are showing steady improvement on their Algebra I SOL results.

Interview participants shared goals, priorities, and values that were implemented to ensure student success. Ninth graders were entering Morrison with many deficits and the teachers, school counselors, and school administrators worked together to develop a comprehensive transition program to assist struggling students with learning good study habits, managing their classes, and attending after school tutorials. Interview participants also shared that providing social interaction opportunities for these students is important to their success. The Freshman Academy team felt that some of the priorities would ultimately lead to student achievement, including promotion to the 10th grade. During 2015-2016, students in the Freshman Academy demonstrated success on most of the intended outcomes. The success speaks to the structure of the Freshman Academy. Participants made clear during the interviews that students in the Freshman Academy are the focus and priority for the team of teachers, school counselors, and school administrators.

The team implemented several activities and strategies to support students' needs. Several members of the team shared that IOU Café, Homework Club, Peer Tutoring, FLEX, Dream Girls/Men on the Move, Double-block classes, Town Hall meetings, and Grade Recovery have been implemented to help support students academically, behaviorally, and socially have provided students; however, the team feels that Double-block classes and Town Hall meetings made the biggest difference for the Freshman Academy students. The team has been working to standardize the Freshman Academy with the implementation of the activities and strategies so students and teachers have established expectations and can make improvements as needed.

The Freshman Academy team spoke at length about why academic outcomes are critical indicators of students' success. On-time graduation is the ultimate goal for students in the transition program, but it takes an entire team to help students achieve this goal. Attendance seems to be the most critical outcome. Several participants shared that attendance was critical for students to get access to what the transition program has to offer. Quantitative and qualitative data revealed that having good attendance is necessary, but not sufficient to ensure success. Activities and strategies that have been implemented in the program are a few of the supports that can assist students with achieving success during ninth grade.

Interview participants stressed the importance of having positive relationships with students and students having positive relationships with peers. A nurturing and supportive environment may be created when a team of teachers who teach the core subjects works together with the same students (Habeeb, 2013). The participants believe that establishing positive relationships has helped to show the students how important they are to the teachers. Peer relationships have been identified as having a positive influence on student' academic performance during transition (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). When students attend a high school where there is a commitment to a common set of goals and an emphasis on personal relationships between teachers and students there is an experience of greater learning gains (Neild, 2009). Interview transcript data provide evidence that the transition team is committed to help to create a more personalized environment for the students in the Freshman Academy.

Qualitative data from the participants' interviews shed light on possible reasons why some of the students are not meeting the benchmark intended outcomes. Many

students have low expectations for their achievement and may not be motivated to complete assignments and attend school regularly. The participants expressed that sometimes some of the students do not take advantage of the available resources the Freshman Academy has to offer and sometimes parents do not support the program. When students do not give their best, this can be a hindrance to their success. The team also shared that sometimes students cannot control outside factors that get in the way of staying after school for extra help including the need for some students to take care of younger siblings. The support of parents helps to ease students' transition to high school and also plays a critical role in their achievement (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gibson, 2006). It is critical that the transition team continue to provide opportunities for parents to be a part of their student's transition. The transition team can provide incentives such as refreshments and door prizes to get parents to attend meetings and play a key role in planning some of the activities.

Several members of the transition team perceived student improvement as a result of the implementation of the Freshman Academy elements, such as improved attendance, discipline, SOL scores, and promotion rates. The team believes students understand the importance of being in school every day to be successful. During 2015-2016, 78% of Freshman Academy students attended school at least 90% of the time, 97% of the students had fewer than 3 discipline referrals, 60% of Freshman Academy students passed their World Geography SOL, and 78% of the students earned five or more credits to be promoted to 10th grade. There is a perception that students are achieving within the Freshman Academy because they are part of a program where the team of adults helps

them to reach their goals. The push for keeping students on track is emphasized throughout the high school experience.

Participants emphasized transition to high school as a process that involves multiple stakeholders having multiple conversations about what is best for the incoming ninth graders. They asserted that when decision-makers have the same objective and are able to coordinate plans, then students are able to have an engaging experience.

### **Other Emergent Findings**

Analyses of the student outcome data and responses from the first follow-up interview questions revealed that lower student performance on some of the benchmark intended outcomes could be a result of not adjusting activities or strategies to address the deficits. When asked about implementing the program with fidelity, the team felt they had consistently and accurately implemented their curriculum, activities, and strategies; however, several students each year have not met one or more of the benchmark intended outcomes. Implementing a program with fidelity also means that changes are made as a result of something not working. The responses to the question regarding fidelity of the program reveal that the transition team may not know exactly which activities or strategies are working. The same program elements have apparently been in place since the inception of the Freshman Academy. The interview participants did not share that any program elements have been adjusted or replaced as a result of students not meeting the benchmark intended outcomes.

Interview participants shared that they are constantly reviewing data and administrators also conduct walkthroughs and note what is taking place during the activities. Several of the Freshman Academy team members attend the activities along

with the students. Students are also asked to report on what is going well and what is not. Everyone in the team attends the town hall meetings, after school tutorials, mentor programs, and field trips. Analysis of the interview transcripts also revealed that the transition team records minutes from their meetings and everyone on the team receives an email copy. The notes are reviewed at each meeting to determine next steps. The transition team plans together to make sure they are addressing the goals of the program. Parents are also invited to attend certain activities and visit classrooms at Morrison. The transition team wants parents to share their thoughts about the activities that have been selected as part of the transition program.

Lastly, interview responses revealed how students, teachers, and school administrators receive feedback in the Freshman Academy. Students receive continuous feedback from their teachers, school counselor, and school administrator regarding assignments, grades, attendance, and behavior. Teachers also hold conferences with students and their parents to share up-to-date information regarding student performance. Students can also receive feedback when they check their grades and attendance online. Teachers encourage students to take advantage of using the student app to get quick access to their information and monitor their progress. Teachers and school administrators receive feedback on student performance from district reports, the student information system, and from information shared at meetings. Administrators also observe each teacher in the Freshman Academy several times during the week and provide teachers with feedback. School administrators receive district-level data and individual school data on the Freshman Program. Typically, these reports include attendance and discipline data.

Freshman students, especially those who have struggled academically as eighth graders, have unique academic and social needs. Failing to meet those needs in the ninth grade year may lead to long term school failure. Programs like the Freshman Academy may help address and meet those needs and smooth students' path to ongoing academic success in Grades 10-12 and beyond.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

There are limitations and delimitations of the study that may have impacted the results. This program evaluation was limited to one high school in southeastern Virginia. All of the quantitative data collected for this study focused on students in one particular transition program over three years.

Another limitation of this study is a result of the purposive sampling of interview participants. The researcher interviewed a small sample of ninth grade teachers, school counselors, and school administrators to collect qualitative data for this study. Their responses are limited to their scope of the Freshman Academy at one school. The assistant principal and freshman lead teacher who worked with Freshman Academy during 2013-2014 changed during 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. This change may have affected how well the strategies were implemented. The same teachers did not teach all of the students in the Freshman Academy.

Student outcome data was examined for three of the seven years the Freshman Academy has been in existence. These quantitative data do not provide the entire history of Freshman Academy student performance. During the three years presented in this study, the Freshman Academy cohorts show some inconsistencies in performance on the benchmark intended outcomes. Analysis of student performance based on percentage

indicates most students in the program have been successful in meeting the benchmark intended outcomes.

Additionally, the role of the researcher could also be considered a limitation to the study. The researcher served an assistant principal at Morrison High School during the same years captured in this study. This could have impacted the interview participants being forthcoming regarding negative experiences in the Freshman Academy.

### **Recommendations for the Morrison Freshman Academy**

This study employed the product component of Stufflebeam's revised (2003) CIPP evaluation model to guide the three evaluation questions and provide a systematic way of examining the strengths and weaknesses of the Freshman Academy. It is evident from the interview responses that the Freshman Academy teachers, school counselors, and school administrators have outlined clear goals for the program and have implemented activities and strategies to assist students with successfully meeting these goals. However, analyses of student outcome data revealed that all students have not consistently met the benchmark intended outcomes. The team must continuously review student data, provide students with feedback on their achievement, and make adjustments as needed to provide continuous support for all of the students in the Freshman Academy. The following recommendations may be beneficial to the Freshman Academy transition team to make improvements and increase the strength of the program.

1. Teachers, school counselors, and school administrators at Morrison should collaborate with the eighth grade staff at the feeder middle schools during the first semester of the school year to develop more personalized activities for eighth grade students that will alleviate concerns they may have about going to high school. Transition activities should expand beyond freshman orientation and



Freshman Welcome Night. These particular activities take place during the spring and only provide eighth grade students with limited opportunities to become familiar with high school expectations.

2. Freshman Academy students should be invited to visit the feeder middle schools to share their transition experience with the eighth grade students. Involving current ninth grade students in the transition process as advocates for the Freshman Academy may be beneficial to eighth grade students. Freshman Academy students can share their high school experience including accomplishments and challenges as ninth graders, and how the program has assisted with their transition. Eighth graders may want to hear from students who are familiar with transition topics including high school courses, hall movement, lunch, and most importantly, attendance. This may help eighth graders feel more at ease about going to high school.
3. Teachers, school counselors, and school administrators should develop a summer bridge program to improve students' academic, behavioral, and social outcomes. Targeted supports for at-risk students should include activities for math and reading enrichment, collaborative exercises with their peers, strategies to help them connect with their teachers, and information that provides an overview of the upcoming school year. These activities will help prepare students for challenges they may encounter in ninth grade. This could also be an opportunity to collaborate with the feeder middle schools in planning the summer program.
4. The freshman administrator should evaluate the professional development plan to ensure teachers are learning the most current researched-based practices and

strategies regarding ninth grade transition. Evaluation of professional development topics on ninth grade transition or sessions could enhance teachers' expertise in working with at-risk students.

5. Qualitative data revealed that parental involvement is critical to student achievement during high school. The Freshman Academy team should work together to be sure parents feel welcomed at Morrison. The team should help to establish a partnership with parents by providing information related to transition and the elements of the Freshman Academy. The team should also engage families in transition activities and provide volunteer opportunities. The team should make it a priority to reach out to parents who are not engaged in the program. Lastly, parents should be provided with opportunities throughout the year to have a voice regarding their concerns and offer feedback to the Freshman Academy team by completing surveys, sharing in a group discussion, or even through social media. Additionally, Freshman Academy students should be provided with opportunities to lead conferences with their parents and teachers. This may also encourage support from parents.
6. School administrators should revisit transition goals, include them in the school's focus plan, and continue to monitor and evaluate the Freshman Academy to improve the transition process and determine how well students are achieving the benchmark intended outcomes.
7. The Freshman Academy team should research and implement additional best practices to assist students who continue to struggle in Algebra. During the three years included in this study, students in the Freshman Academy have continued to

struggle with passing the Algebra I SOL. No adjustments have been made to the current activities or instructional strategies to help more students master the concepts and increase individual Algebra I SOL performance.

8. The Freshman Academy team should meet to develop a plan to implement research-based transition strategies to support students when they transition from ninth to 10th grade. Vertical articulation will need to take place to align the strategies and engage all students in a higher level of learning. This could be implemented on a smaller scale and monitored during the first year to determine the effectiveness of the strategies.
9. The Freshman Academy team should develop and administer a survey to the Freshman Academy students each year to get their insight regarding adjustments that need to be made in the program.

### **Recommendations for Future Evaluation and Research**

A longitudinal comparison study of Freshman Academy students and ninth grade students with similar at-risk factors who are not selected to participate in the Freshman Academy would be beneficial. Quantitative analysis could help to determine students' needs and provide additional resources within the school district to ease transition. Additionally, quantitative data collected would also help to determine graduation rates of students receiving additional sources versus students who are not.

The school district could assist schools with funding for additional activities for both eighth and ninth graders. Funding and resources provided at the district level might assist schools with meeting ninth grade transition goals by supporting activities during the summer to bridge gaps in learning. District-level personnel could also assist schools

with continued financial support for sustaining transition planning within other district initiatives.

Lastly, the school district should develop a systematic early warning system to assist schools with identifying students with deficits, to ensure all students are receiving targeted interventions while they are still in school, and to prevent students from dropping out. The early warning system might provide schools with a complete student profile to include indicators such as attendance and discipline.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, I examined extant student outcome data as well as the viewpoints of teachers, school counselors, and school administrators to determine the impact of the Freshman Academy on student achievement. This is a perspective that has been limited in previous research. Research supports a full transition program to address student academic, behavioral, and social outcomes; however, findings show that even when students are placed in small learning communities throughout the year they tend to experience more positive educational outcomes (Alspaugh, 1998). Ninth grade transition can be a challenging experience for students. Every school division must consider which strategies and programs need to be implemented in both middle and high schools to support student success. Activities should begin in eighth grade and continue throughout the ninth grade year. The transition to high school is considered to be a developmental process. Stakeholders' expertise can drive the initial conversations on how to best support students. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of the program elements can only assist teams in providing stronger transition programs to help students achieve the intended

outcomes. This study adds to the body of research that supports comprehensive and effective ninth grade transition programs.

## Appendix A

### **Email invitation requesting participation in the teacher\school counselor\administrator interview**

Date:

Dear Teacher\Administrator\School Counselor:

My name is Micah Smith and I am a doctoral student at the College of William and Mary. My dissertation is entitled *Promoting Student Success: An Evaluation of a Ninth Grade Transition Program* and the purpose of my study is to evaluate the impact of the ninth grade transition program, the Freshman Academy, on academic achievement. As a method for collecting this information, I am interviewing teachers, school counselors, and administrators who have had some interaction with ninth grade students. Your responses to the interview questions are crucial in providing the necessary information to formulate useful programs to support the students and staff. The interview will be conducted after school in a secure location. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes. Your response and time are greatly appreciated.

To participate in the interview, please respond to this email with your name, email address, and phone number and complete and return the attached consent document to the researcher at the time of the individual interview. Once I receive your email, I will contact you to schedule an interview.

Your responses will be kept strictly confidential. Please know that your participation is voluntary and there is no penalty if you do not participate. You may also withdraw from this study at any time. Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Megan Tschannen-Moran at (757) 221-2187 or [mxtsch@wm.edu](mailto:mxtsch@wm.edu) or Dr. Thomas Ward, the chair of the Education Internal Review Committee (EDIRC) at The College of William and Mary at (757) 221-2358 or [tom.ward@wm.edu](mailto:tom.ward@wm.edu).

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Micah Smith

## Appendix B

### Teacher\School Counselor\Administrator Informed Consent Form

***Promoting Student Success:  
An Evaluation of a Ninth Grade Transition Program***

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in a research study involving high school teachers, school counselors, and administrators who are currently involved in some aspect of ninth grade transition. My dissertation is entitled *Promoting Student Success: An Evaluation of a Ninth Grade Transition Program* and the purpose of my study is to evaluate the impact of the ninth grade transition program, the Freshman Academy, on academic achievement. This study is being conducted as partial fulfillment of a doctoral program requirement at the College of William and Mary.

As a participant, I understand that my involvement in this study is purposeful in that general and special education teachers, school counselors, and administrators have been selected from one high school to participate in an effort to provide insight in the following areas: GPA, attendance, discipline, and SOL performance. Additionally, I understand that the honesty and candor of my responses is critical to the outcome of the study, and that I am not required to answer every question that is asked.

I understand that I will be asked to participate in an individual interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded and will focus on my responses regarding my perception of ninth grade transition and programs that impact student success in high school. In addition, I agree that I will read and review my responses and check and correct them for accuracy as well as to clarify or provide any needed additional information. I have been informed that any information obtained for this study will be recorded in a pseudonym that will allow only the researcher to determine my identity. All efforts will be made to conceal my identity in the study's report of results and to keep my personal information confidential.

Because the focus of this study is related directly to my personal experiences and perceptions, I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the study at any time by notifying the researcher by e-mail or telephone (Micah Smith at 757-329-0304 or mlsmi2@email.wm.edu). My decision to participate will not affect my relations with faculty, administration, or with the College of William and Mary in general. Additionally, my decision to participate will not affect my relationships with my building level administrator or with the school division for which I work.

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757-221-3966) ON 2017-05-01 AND EXPIRES ON 2018-05-01.

I am required to notify Dr. Megan Tschannen-Moran at (757) 221-2187 or mxtsch@wm.edu, Dr. Thomas Ward, the chair of the Education Internal Review Committee (EDIRC) at The College of William and Mary at (757) 221-2358 or EDIRC-L@wm.edu, and Dr. Jennifer Stevens, Chair of the PHSC at 757-221-3862 (jastev@wm.edu) if any issues arise in connection with my participation in this study.

My signature below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I have received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator



## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

1. What were the concerns of the teachers, school counselors, and administrators prior to implementation of the Freshman Academy?
2. What are the goals, priorities, and values of the Freshman Academy?
3. Why were the specific activities or strategies selected as part of the Freshman Academy? Would you speak to the components that you think make the biggest difference?
4. What are your perceptions of the academic outcomes in regard to GPA, attendance, discipline, Standards of Learning assessments, and credits earned of students participating in the Freshman Academy?
5. What do you think most contributes to the positive student outcomes for students in the academy?
6. What do you think are the barriers to students achieving the intended outcomes of the program?
7. What are the most positive effects of the Freshman Academy?
8. What are the areas in which you would like to see the Freshman Academy improve? Do you have ideas for how those improvements might be implemented? Are there additional activities or strategies that you would like to see implemented in the Freshman Academy?

#### Possible Follow-up Questions:

9. To what degree is each activity or strategy being implemented with fidelity?
10. How are program activities or strategies monitored?
11. How do students receive feedback in the Freshman Academy?
12. How do teachers and administrators receive feedback in the Freshman Academy?

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**Vita**  
**Micah Lonae Smith**

**EDUCATION**

- 2007-2017 Doctor of Education; Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership  
The College of William and Mary  
Williamsburg, VA
  
- 2002-2004 Master of Science in Human Resources Management  
Troy State University  
Norfolk, VA
  
- 1987-1991 Bachelor of Arts in English Education  
Norfolk State University  
Norfolk, VA

**EXPERIENCE**

- 2016-Present Data Specialist  
Newport News Public Schools
  
- 2011-2016 Assistant Principal for Instruction  
Newport News Public Schools
  
- 2009-2011 Data Analyst  
Newport News Public Schools
  
- 2007-2009 IB Coordinator  
Suffolk Public Schools
  
- 2005-2007 Data Analyst  
Suffolk Public Schools
  
- 1996-2005 English Teacher  
Newport News Public Schools
  
- 1991-1996 Language Arts Teacher  
Newport News Public Schools