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**Transitioning to High School: An Examination of the Issues and Proposed Solutions**

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**Transitioning to High School: An Examination of the Issues and  
Proposed Solutions**

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**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Education**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2011**

## **Abstract**

# **Transitioning to High School: An Examination of the Issues and Proposed Solutions**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

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Students' first year of high school can set them on a trajectory for future success or struggles. The transition experience is a significant part of the first year of high school. Environmental, academic and social issues can pose challenges for which students are not prepared. These hurdles can establish significant deficits early in high school from which it can be difficult to recover. The interventions proposed by current research provide concrete suggestions for current education practitioners that could ease the transition experience of students starting high school.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The transition from middle school to high school is often a challenge for students (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Geographical, social, and academic changes are just a few of the challenges to be expected. Students' first year in high school, most often ninth grade, sets them on a trajectory for future success or struggles. Research has shown that students' transition experience influenced their educational success including retention and academic performance (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Smith, 1997; Stein & Husson, 2007). In order to set students on a path for success, special attention must be paid to the first year of high school. During this year, students often identify social groups, develop study habits, and place values on the aspects of the high school experience. Successfully navigating this transition period is crucial to students' long term achievement.

While the start of high school is an opportunity for a fresh start personally and academically, research has identified the occasion as one marked by student struggles. Research has shown that the rates of course failure, expulsion, suspension, and dropout are higher in the ninth grade than any other grade level in high school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Smith, Akos, Lim & Wiley, 2008; Smith, Feldwisch & Abell, 2006). Students who struggle through the transition to high school often experience normative achievement loss and behavior problems (Alspaugh, 1998a, 1998b; Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Times of transition have been linked with decreased self esteem, reduced involvement in activities and lower grade point averages (Cantin &

Boivin, 2004; Somers, Owens & Piliawsky, 2010). Further, it has also been noted that after the transition to high school, students have lower grade point averages, less frequent attendance, and an increase in negative peer interactions (Frey, Ruchkin, Martin & Schwab-Stone, 2009). Difficult transitions can negatively impact the students' sense of belonging (Akos & Galassi, 2004) which can prevent the student from actively engaging. These common struggles may lead students to drop out of high school (Smith, 1997).

While the challenges experienced may seem contained to the teenage years, if a student struggles with the transition, there can be lifelong consequences. The transition from middle to high school is a pivotal juncture for students at risk of dropping out (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Lys, 2009). Academic failure due to poor transition to high school has been directly linked to a student's probability of dropping out (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). One third of all students that drop out of high school, dropout during their freshmen year (Lys, 2009). If a student fails more than one semester of a core class and earns fewer than five full course credits by the end of the freshmen year, that student is not on schedule to graduate (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Once a student falls behind, getting back on schedule can seem impossible to the student. This frustration may contribute to their giving up and dropping out.

A student who does not graduate from high school will likely struggle throughout life. Without a diploma, dropouts are more likely to make less money, be on welfare, and go to prison; they are also less likely to maintain positive physical and mental health (Ou & Reynolds, 2008). Individuals who do not graduate from high school are more likely to experience unemployment, underemployment, incarceration, and long-term dependency

on social services (Perin, Flugmna & Spiegel, 2006). The costs of low graduation rates are significant to the community and the individual. In order to reduce these costs being incurred, preventative measures must be put in place to reduce the number of students dropping out of high school.

The beginning of high school presents new people and new situations. A student's ability to handle the new environment can impact student's high school experience and probability of success. Comprehensive transition programs addressing these issues have been shown to significantly improve students' likelihood of graduating (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Smith et al., 2006). Schools without a transition program have an average dropout rate of 24%, while schools with fully functioning transition programs have a dropout rate around 8% (Reents, 2002). In addition to improving graduation rates, comprehensive high school transition programs have been shown to improve students' attendance, achievement and retention (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). High school transition programs are able to significantly improve key student performance statistics.

While the implementation of a transition program often begins with the high school, there is work that can be done at the middle school level to prepare students for the experience. The transition does not begin on the student's first day of high school; it must be introduced over time starting in middle school. Middle schools are responsible for preparing students, academically and socially, to help facilitate a smoother transition and encourage the enthusiasm with which the students anticipate the transition (Lys, 2009).

Advancing to new schools can become more impersonal and intimidating as students progress through the school system (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Research suggests that students who have developed positive coping strategies are more likely to have a stronger sense of belonging to the school during the transition period (Isakon & Jarvis, 1999). These positive strategies, if taught in middle school, could help students develop a strong sense of belonging to the school which could also increase campus collaboration and success of more individual students. This feeling of being connected also improves academic attitudes, achievement, attendance, and participation in school activities while decreasing dropout rates of a school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Osterman, 2000). When a student's anxiety is reduced there is greater opportunity for academic success (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). To reduce the students' anxiety through the transition process, staff from sending and receiving campuses must communicate and collaborate in implementing a comprehensive program that meets the transitioning students' needs.

In this paper, I will review existing research and literature on the middle school to high school transition. Students face a series of challenges at the time of transition including environmental, academic and social issues. Furthermore, multicultural considerations also must be examined. These considerations include race, ethnicity and culture as well as ability and gender. Once the areas of concern are identified, I will provide suggestions for educators as to how to address these issues based on current research. Finally, I will conclude with an appraisal of existing research and suggestions in moving forward with further research.

## **Chapter 2: Transitional Challenges**

### **ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES**

The transition to high school can be challenging for students simply because it is an unfamiliar environment (Tonkin & Watt, 2003). The environment refers to the school's physical structure, number of students and the systems implemented. Such systems would include procedures, consequences, use of time, how students are grouped as well as the student-staff relationship.

The Environmental Systems Theory examines the degree to which a child's development is impacted by the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes the environment as a series of concentric circles or layers that surround the child. These layers are labeled microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that each of these layers impact the development of the child whether it be through direct contact or indirect influences. The microsystem refers to the settings that have direct contact with the students such as home and school. The slightly removed mesosystem refers to the connections between the structures of the child's microsystem, such as the teacher parent relationship. The exosystem is less direct and refers to the impacts of the relationship between a part of the child's microsystem and an external social setting. An example of the exosystem could be a parent's work environment or a teacher's home environment. Lastly, the macrosystem describes the culture within which the child lives. The impact each of these layers have on the development of a child can be significant. Therefore, attention ought to be given to the role the school environment plays in a student's transition to high

school. It is the intention of this paper to focus on the school as a part of the child's microsystem and the school's relationship with the child's parents being the mesosystem.

Challenges presented by the new environment can be exacerbated by high schools' large size, and lack of intimacy or perceived availability of caring support. Students approaching the transition to high school report concerns regarding structural and organizational issues as well as a fear of becoming lost in the environment of the new school (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Smith et al., 2008). A school's environment can magnify the students' personal and social concerns (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). This makes environmental issues including school procedures and structures significant to the transition experience.

In approaching the start of high school, students report concerns regarding the new school's procedures. Concerns that students most often report include finding classes, having enough time to get to class or eat lunch, opening a locker, knowing school and classroom rules, as well as the consequences for breaking them (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Potter, Shliskey, Stevenson & Drawdy, 2001). Students consider the new school procedures an adjustment challenge (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). In another study, Akos (2002) similarly found students to be primarily concerned about the new school's rules and procedures.

In high school, students have many different teachers, and each of these teachers have different expectations and standards (Ganesone & Ehrich, 2009). This can be confusing for students who are looking for clarity in the rules of high school. Instead,

they are expected to adjust to different rules and expectations every hour. This lack of consistency can be overwhelming and anxiety provoking for students new to high school.

Even the structure of the school day can challenge a positive transition experience. While block scheduling allows students additional course options and increased instruction time, such a schedule reduces students' opportunities to interact with other students and school personnel during passing periods (Lys, 2009; Noddings, 1992). Positive interactions with peers and campus staff can foster the sense of security and social support which play an important role in a successful transition.

While teachers impact the academic portion of the transition, the role teachers are able to play is defined by the school environment. Students identify teachers as impacting the transition experience (Ganesone & Ehrich, 2009). Green (1997) found that students were concerned their teachers did not know them as well as their teachers in lower grades. Green (1997) also found that students did not believe that the teachers were available when the students needed them. Students report a lack of opportunities to form close relationships with teachers and perceive teachers as putting forth little effort to make instruction relevant (Drotterer, McHale & Crouter, 2009; Eccles, Wingfield & Schiefeke, 1998).

The above findings can be partially attributed to the student teacher ratio. As students get older, there are generally more students in each class. Also, in the older grades teachers will likely have six or seven of these larger classes. It is difficult for a single teacher to get to know roughly 200 students on a personal level and be able to provide each student with individualized instruction. A reduction in the student to

teacher ratio would likely allow for teachers to get to know their students better and have more time available per student outside of class. A reduction in teachers' work load unrelated to the classroom could also free additional time for students.

Legters and Kerr (2001) found that the large bureaucratic systems of high schools offer little support for incoming students, especially those students who may have only had weak social and academic preparation. Research suggests high schools are larger and more bureaucratic than middle schools (Drotterer et al., 2009; Eccles et al., 1998). The bureaucratic nature of high school can be particularly intimidating for ninth graders (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). While structure and order are necessary to maintain continuity on a larger campus, the impact on students should also be taken into consideration.

The number of transitions required of students has been linked with achievement loss (Alspaugh, 1998b; Smith, 2006; Smith et al., 2008). Alspaugh (1998b) found that students experienced less achievement loss in districts with a single campus serving students kindergarten through eighth grade as opposed to dividing these grades between separate elementary and middle schools. This study also found the larger the size of the schools contributed to the achievement loss. In addition to achievement loss, Alspaugh (1998b) found that the number of transitions and size of schools also impacted the districts' dropout rates, suggesting that smaller schools may yield more positive results.

Eccles and Midgley (1989) have theorized, that in order for students to achieve optimal results, their environment should match their developmental stage. Their stage-environment fit theory is based on person – environment fit theory (Eccles, Midgley,

Wingfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan & Mac Iver, 1993; Hunt, 1975). Person-environment fit theory proposes that if an environment does not appropriately meet students' psychological needs there will result in a decline in students' motivation, behavior, and mental health. An optimal environment would meet a student's needs, but also challenge the student to grow. While this theory has been examined in application to the transition to middle school during early adolescence, the concepts can be transferred from to middle adolescence and the transition to high school. It would be beneficial for future research to explore this theory in application to the transition to high school.

Research suggests students would benefit from an academic setting that is less complex and more intimate than most comprehensive high schools (Entwisle, 1990; Somers et al., 2010). This could allow for the school to make the students feel more secure through predictability and responsiveness to student concerns (Sommer, et al., 2010). Students who report perceiving less support from school, are the same students that lack involvement in the school (Frey et al., 2009, Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell & Friedman, 1994). Making the school appear less complex and more intimate would likely increase students' perceptions of support leading to increased investment and involvement in the campus.

Ganeson and Ehrich, (2009) reported students identifying a need for programs or activities that would support new freshmen. It is through the programs that a school establishes, that the anxiety of students produced by the new environment is reduced. Programs are a part of the school environment, but are able to address the additional issues students experience such as academic and social concerns.

## **ACADEMIC CHALLENGES**

The changes in academic structure and expectations present a series of challenges to first year high school students. Students report concerns regarding the amount and type of homework, taking tests, expectations of teachers and getting good grades (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Potter et al, 2001). Students learn that there are additional academic differences, between middle school and high school, including subject departmentalization, teaching techniques and credit requirements.

The academic structure of middle schools and high schools is significantly different, though this may not one of the changes students anticipate upon the start of high school. Often middle schools are broken down into smaller learning communities, while in high school, courses are usually departmentalized by content area. Cotterel (2002) found high schools to have a more subject based curriculum while in younger grades information is often presented in a thematic, inter disciplinary style. Students report that information taught in different classes were unrelated to each other (Ganesone & Ehrich, 2009). Studies have repeatedly found this departmentalization of curriculum presents a challenge to students who view each course as discrete units (Beane, 1991; Ganesone & Ehrich, 2009). As integrated curriculum is often seen in the lower grades, the division of subject matter challenges students to independently draw connections between courses and find meaning in the material.

Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) have suggested that a cross curricular education on the secondary level could ease the academic transition for students. This requires teacher teamwork which would need to be supported by the structure established by the campus's

administration. Furthermore, while Manning (2000) found strength in the integrated and theme based approach to cross curricular presentations, Carrington (2006) found that this attempt to create a cohesive unit inevitably left specialist, or elective, teachers functioning in isolation (Ganesone & Ehrich, 2009). Additional research is necessary to determine the impact of high schools departing from the current subject departmentalization for a more integrated approach.

A restructure of the campus may not be necessary to assist students in finding meaning in the skills and content being taught. Azzam (2007) encourages teachers to incorporate experiential learning into the classroom. This can assist students in drawing the connection in how school is preparing them for the workforce (Somer et al., 2010). Students reported that different types of learning activities were used in the classrooms also created challenges in academic success (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). New expectations and ways of presenting material can push the student's comfort zone. High school teachers are able to prepare students for new activities if the high school teacher is informed of the activities used on the middle school level. New activities may need to be presented to the students in a gradual manner, or provide rationale to students about the change. Teachers are called to provide a more responsive and engaging curriculum and pedagogy for students to help them function in a changing world (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Pendergast, 2005). Furthermore, problem solving skills in addition to higher order thinking need to be developed (Carrington, 2006; Ganesone & Ehruch, 2009). When teachers relate content and skills to future application, students are more likely to remain engaged in school.

A significant concern of students entering high school is rooted in the amount, frequency and rigor of homework to be assigned. Homework in high school plays a more extensive role in classes than students coming from middle school are generally accustomed to (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). Students have reported that the amount, frequency and high expectations were too difficult (Elias, 2002; Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998). Students lack the organization and time management skills required to complete the assignments outside of the school day because it has never been required in the past. The skills necessary to complete homework effectively and efficiently must be scaffold as academic skills would be taught.

According to Smith, Akos, Lim and Wiley (2008) students may not fully understand the process of earning credits, academic expectations or attendance policies. The process of earning credits in high school is very different than the earning of a series of grades on a report card in middle school. If students have a habit of absences in middle school, this will be a difficult habit to change, leading to credit denial according to state attendance laws. Students do not appear to understand the cumulative effect of course completion until well into the freshmen year (Smith et al., 2008).

Additional considerations should be made for the change in student teacher relationships. Lower grade levels are considered to be very nurturing, while higher grade levels focus more on expectations and professionalism. Some students, in explaining why ninth grade is so much more difficult than eighth, mention that teachers are unapproachable, too busy or belittling (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Newman, Lohman, Newman, Meyers & Smith, 2000b). Students accustomed to a sensitive nurturing

relationship with the teacher may interpret a teacher with a focus on curriculum rather than individual development as cold, uncaring or mean. The difference in how the teacher relates to students can encourage or discourage students' engagement in the course, and consequently academic success.

There have been a handful of studies measuring the changes of academic achievement brought on or exacerbated by the transition experience. Smith (2006) explored the extent of normative achievement loss for students identified as high achieving. There is a subset of high achieving students that experience achievement loss as a result of the transition from middle to high school (Smith, 2006). It is possible that these students are overlooked because while they do experience a decline, they are still performing as well or better than their grade level peers. Smith (2006) studied the long term impact of the high school transition, and determined the achievement loss, among high achieving students, during the transition to high school appears to affect the students' success in college. Smith (2006) found that students who experienced achievement loss in the transition to high school, indicated a strong predictor of high achieving students eventually leaving college. While the research methods were sound for the most part, Smith utilized students' self-reports regarding grades in eighth grade which could skew the data (Smith, 2006). Transcripts, report cards, or standardized testing would have been more reliable data points in establishing students' baseline.

Another study looked at trends in math and reading academic achievement for student across the transition experience. Ding (2008) explored students' growth/change profiles from seventh through tenth grades. The study used students' grade point

averages, in math and English, as data points at the end of seventh and eighth grade, as well as the end of the fall and spring semesters of ninth and tenth grades. Ding (2008) was able to identify a series of trends formulating four profiles. Most students fell within Profile 1, where students' grades experienced a significant decline upon the start of high school. In Profile 2, students experienced the most significant decline in grades at the start of tenth grade. This could be due to increased difficulty in curriculum or removal of support systems in place for ninth grade students. Profiles 3 and 4 made up less than a third of the sample and did not show any sort of consistency in trends relating to the transition. Ding (2008) also identified a small group that remained constant from middle school through high school, these students had near perfect grade point averages with a single exception. It is important to remember that even if grades do not decline, high achieving students can still be struggling through the transition. This study does not correct for inconsistencies in curriculum and grading. It would have been beneficial to have also compared students' scores across time on a standardized test.

It is important that teachers work to actively engage students at the appropriate personal and academic level. Boredom and a lack of interest in class have been cited by 47% of high school dropouts as a major reason for leaving school (Bridgeland, DiJulio & Morrison, 2006; Drotterer et al., 2009). Boredom can be a result of information too far above, or below, the student's own perceived ability. Regular assessments and open communication between teacher and student, allow for teachers to understand a student's actual and perceived ability.

When students experience too much stress, which can be caused by too many changes at once, their grades often suffer which is accompanied by decreased academic motivation (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). As a part of a comprehensive transition program, schools should consider a growth model for gradual change across the transition process. This would include the academic standards and homework as well as accurately informing students about the change in instructional styles and expectations of teachers to be anticipated. The important facets of a transition program will be detailed in a later chapter. In addition to the school's environment and academics, social issues can augment the challenges of transitioning to high school.

### **SOCIAL CHALLENGES**

Social issues become increasingly important for students as they transition from middle to high school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) report that peers can play a significant positive or negative role in other students' transitions, identifying friendship as important for survival in high school. Additional research indicates that peer conformity peaks for most students during the ninth grade (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). The anxiety associated with maintaining existing friendships, making new ones, and avoiding bullies impacts the social aspect of the transition experience.

Students worry about having friends and getting along with other students as well as teachers (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). In the transition to high school students may be separated from established friends. Green (1997) found that while many students look forward to the opportunities presented by the transition to high school, many students reported experiencing social problems in adjusting to the new school and making new

friends. Students may go on to separate high schools, or may regroup at the high school level (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). This separation compounded with the student's desire to maintain old friendships can cause anxiety (Elias, 2002; Hinebauch, 2002). This anxiety could also be exacerbated by the desire to find a place to fit in at the new school or pressure to climb a perceived social ladder.

High school is more anonymous than middle school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Research shows that students have reported being concerned with belonging to the right group, making friends, getting along with older students, dealing with bullies, joining clubs and sports, liking teachers and dressing up or taking a shower after gym class (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Potter et al, 2001). While these concerns can seem trivial when isolated, when compounded with other transition issues, the anxiety can be overwhelming for students. Providing students with coping strategies and realistic expectations may reduce some of the anxiety rooted in social issues.

Students often report a fear of being bullied (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). Akos (2002) supports the bullying concerns, and found that students were most worried about being bullied by older students. Other research pointed to bullying as a more significant issue for students with lower achievement (Kiloh and Morris, 2000). A number of studies have consistently found students to report being concerned about bullying, intimidation by older students and over all school safety (Arrowsafe & Irvin, 1992; Hatton, 1995; Mizelle, 1999; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

Scholars suggest more peer related problems for girls in middle school (Chung, Elias & Schneider, 1998). This may lead to girls' feelings of a lack of social support

among peers in the transition to high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Research has shown that girls perceive less social support than their male peers (Akos, 2002; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). The perception of social support is important in fostering a sense of security which has a variety of positive implications.

Akos and Galassi (2004) found that most students' fears when entering high school concerned the amount of homework, the rigor of the classes and fear of getting lost on the new campus. These same students reported that they were looking forward to increased freedom, making new friends and attending schools events. After the transition, these students reflected that the academic and social challenges proved to be the most difficult part of the experience (Akos & Galassi, 2004). This study shows that students enter high school with positive expectations regarding social issues, but that this becomes one of the most challenging components of the transition experience.

Akos and Galassi (2004) found students to report social issues as presenting significant challenges to the transition to high school. Based on students' pre-transition expectations, students did not anticipate social issues to present challenges (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Since students may not be anticipating social difficulties, the lack of awareness can augment the challenges experienced. Without proper preparation, students do not know to be prepared for negative social issues. If students knew to expect negative social issues, in addition to the positive existing anticipations, they may be able to enter the transition better equipped for handling these challenges. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the schools and parents to instill realistic expectations towards the start

of high school. In addition to realistic expectations, students should also be taught skills to handle new social situations should they arise.

Green (1997) was able to identify a focus for interventions that could improve social issues. Students are not doomed to struggle socially during the first year of high school, rather it was found that once students feel secure in the new school, find increasing confidence in self and begin to make friends, the earlier reported anxiety fades away (Green, 1997). This shows interventions focused on improving students' sense of belonging, could yield positive results regarding other issues.

The primary purpose of school is academics, so teachers and administrators may not see the importance of addressing the social components of the transition to high school. However, research has shown that social concerns dominate the child's attention if they are not addressed, and these would alter or detract the focus from academics (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). In order to support students' academic success, it is suggested social issues be addressed in a comprehensive transition program. In addition to environmental, academic and social issues, a strong transition program is encouraged to be sensitive of individual differences.

## **DIVERSE POPULATION CONSIDERATIONS**

### **Race and Ethnicity**

Diverse student populations present additional factors to be considered and applied to the transition to high school. Cultural considerations regarding acculturation, communication and expectations can significantly impact a student's transition

experience. Additional issues may also arise in meeting diverse students' needs through the transition process.

While the transition from middle school to high school can be difficult for all students, it can be particularly difficult for students if all cultures are not considered throughout the transition process (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2010; Cauce, Hannan, & Sargent, 1992). High school students are dropping out of school at alarming rates; less than two-thirds of students complete high school four years after entering the ninth grade (Smyth, 2006). The data suggest even more problematic trends for minority students with only half graduating in four years (Smyth, 2006). The existing trends demonstrate students' need for support across the transition to high school and through graduation.

Minority populations have a significantly higher dropout rate than Caucasian students. These minority students are concentrated within urban school districts which also have been shown to have lower graduation rates (Fustenberg & Neumark, 2007). In order to better meet the needs of minority populations, attention needs to be paid to the acculturation process in schools, as well as to the relationships that the school fosters with the students' families at home and the community at large.

Benner and Graham (2009) examined the transition to high school of multiethnic urban youth evaluating feelings towards school, academics and attendance. In eighth grade, African American and Asian students reported liking school more than White peers. At the start of high school, African American students described a reduced feeling of school belonging that White students. This may be associated with sense of loneliness.

African American and Asian students expressed more loneliness after the transition than White students. Benner and Graham (2009) describe the academic finding to be consistent with existing views of the achievement gap. African American and biracial or multiethnic students earned lower grades at the end of middle school than White students, and African American and Latino students experienced significant declines after the transition. Attendance issues were also measured by the number of students' absences. Compared to White students, at the end of eighth grade, African American students had more absences, while Asian students had even less. After the transition to high school, Latino students' absences increased while White students' absences declined. African American, Latino and multiethnic students all had significantly more absences than White students, and students of all backgrounds increased absence rates over the rest of high school.

Benner and Graham (2009) applied these findings in regards to the school context. The study suggests African American and Latino students who transitioned to high schools where there were significantly fewer same-ethnicity peers experienced a more stressful transition. This change in context resulted in significant declines in attendance, academics, and sense of belonging to school (Benner & Graham, 2009). The impact of a change in ethnic makeup from middle school to high school should be taken into consideration by school districts when zoning schools as well as the middle schools when preparing students for the transition.

Students' experience of acculturation, the blending of their first culture and the school culture, can significantly impact the transition to high school (Lys, 2009). The

additive model of acculturation proposes that acculturation is a more inclusive approach than classic assimilation for linguistic minority students (Lys, 2009). This model encourages students to continue to embrace the language and culture of origin and find ways to integrate into the new surroundings. When schools are uninformed regarding students' languages and cultures, they are unable to aid in this incorporation. This approach looks at the students as a whole, not just through local culture's lenses. There are several areas to be addressed, and these include instructional, social, cultural and individual factors that play into the student's success in high school. Lys (2009) points out that schools can apply this additive model through policies, procedures and in individual classrooms.

In contrast to the additive model of acculturation, schools can also operate in a subtractive mode. Lys (2009) describes the subtractive model as forcing students to assimilate to the majority culture, and to deny heritage cultures and languages. This has been shown to be less advantageous as students often report a lack of a sense of belonging to the school community (Lys, 2009). This related to the "deficient perspective" when teachers may identify attributes of the students' culture of origin as a hindrance to the students success in the new school climate (Osterling, Violand-Sanchez & von Vacco, 1999). When schools encourage students to shed their former way of life and embrace new culture, the students experience confusion and may come across as defiant in clinging to their culture of origin.

Even if a student shows strong academic grades and positive attendance reports, the student may still be struggling with the transition. Students could be experiencing

depression or low self esteem, and this could be linked to the students' acculturation experience (Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2010; Bankston & Zhou, 2002). Minority students of all cultures may be experiencing discrimination. Discrimination has been linked to depression, psychological distress and lowered self-esteem (Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2010; Moradi & Hasan, 2004).

Akos and Galassi (2002) found that Latino students found the middle school counselors to be more helpful in the transition process than their parents. This could be that the parents did not have the opportunity to successfully navigate the school system and are less equipped to anticipate and address transition concerns. Effective communication can empower parents with information and skills to guide their students through the transition process.

For some families, a barrier to communication with schools could be the availability of resources in the families' primary language. Research has found that school materials are not often presented in languages other than English (Lys, 2009). The difference in language and literacy skills of school staff and Latino students and their families may increase the barriers to achievement as school becomes more demanding in high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Osterling et al., 1999). Important information, such as, minimum attendance requirements may not be available in languages other than English.

A lack of knowledge regarding requirements combined with family expectations may prevent some students from meeting the attendance requirements (Lys, 2009; Orellana, 2001). The family expectations could include working to support the family

financially, caring for younger siblings, or other household work (Orellana, 2001). Poor attendance can result in the student not receiving credit for the course, even if a passing grade is earned. When this occurs, students may become frustrated and drop out of high school.

Families' values may not be the same as those of the school system (Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2010). Many American public schools can be considered European-American centric. Factors of assimilation and acculturation within the schools play a significant role in how students find and define success. A clash in the values of the culture of origin and the majority American culture may pose a challenge for minority students. Some cultures may place a high value on family loyalty, whereas Americans often value individual competence and competition (Ascher, 1989; Eisenbruch, 1988). It is important that schools understand and respect all cultures and their values.

Students who are not Black, Caucasian or Latino are often grouped together as "other" since they comprise such a small percentage of the campus population. Research has shown that these students have concerns that are more intense than their peers of major ethnic groups (Akos & Galassi, 2004). These concerns are centralized at being around students of other races and being liked by others.

Research has shown that students of minority groups may experience a more intense negative response to the transition experience (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cauce et al., 1992; Mosely & Lex, 1990). It has been theorized, that the challenges seen among urban minority students in the transition to high school relates to the school environment. This includes issues of large schools with overcrowded classrooms and complicated

bureaucracy; this is compounded by many of the students' lack of financial resources (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Seidman et al., 1994).

Taken together, this research demonstrates the importance of cultural sensitivity. It is suggested schools take acculturation, family values and students' sense of belonging into consideration when working with diverse populations. In addition to cultural awareness, gender and ability considerations are proposed.

### **Gender**

Gender should also be taken into consideration when looking at specific populations. Male students have shown a higher tendency to drop out of high school than female students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). The difference in graduation rates by gender warrant further exploration as to why this occurs. Lan and Lanthier (2003) did not yield statistically significant results in most domains when evaluating the role gender plays in successful transition to high school and the possibility of dropping out.

Benner and Graham (2009) found female students to have a stronger sense of school belonging and like school more than male students at the end of middle school. By the start of high school, male students reported liking school more. Even though the female students reported more positive feelings about school climate, they also experienced more challenges in their psychological adjustment. Female students expressed feelings of anxiety and loneliness. While female students experienced more difficulties in the transition, they did earn high grades, but experienced a greater grade

decline across the transition than male students. The study did not yield significant difference in number of absences according to gender.

Akos and Galassi (2004) found that gender was not statistically significant variable is students' overall perceptions of the transition to high school. In regards to students feeling connectedness to school, middle school female students expressed feeling more connected than their male peers, while in high school, male students reported feeling more connected than their female peers (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Students' sense of belonging can impact academic outcomes (Osterman, 2000), and ought to be addressed in a transition program.

Lys (2009) study examines eighth grade students' perceptions and anticipations of high school. While female students held positive views regarding the transition, many anticipated challenges from the school social and cultural environment that would magnify the incongruence between home and school. Additionally, Lys (2009) found among eighth graders, that male students worried more than female students about not being able to graduate from high school.

The research shows that male students experience more dramatic declines than female students in the transition process. This was measured based on students' attendance, grades, behavior in class and teacher perceptions (Ding, 2008; Roderick, 2003). The concern male students experience begins before entering high school and yet there seems to be little done to prevent this from becoming a self fulfilling prophecy.

While existing studies have analyzed the role gender plays in the transition experience, additional research is still needed. Gender issues in the transition process warrant further exploration as well as how gender impacts response to interventions.

### **Ability**

Students with either physical or mental disabilities are also less likely to complete high school (Doyle & Giangreco, 2009). This may be because proper accommodations or modifications are not being made by teachers or administrators. These changes could be made in the physical building, presentation of information, form of assessment or in a number of other ways.

It is common, for students receiving special education services to be placed in special education classes for the first time upon entering high school (Doyle & Giangreco, 2009). During elementary and middle school, students are likely to be in a more inclusive environment, and are able to participate in general education classrooms (Doyle & Giangreco, 2009). While the student may not have changed much over the few months of the summer break, the context, traditions and expectations of high school likely play a role in the change of student placement (Doyle & Giagreco, 2009). The special education teachers are needed to support the general education teachers in working with the students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities (Doyle & Giagreco, 2009).

Students' perceptions of the transition and transition outcomes are impacted by the students' gender, race and school environment (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Ability, gender, race and ethnicity as well as other cultural considerations should be addressed by

schools. While these factors play a role in the transition process, they should also be taken into consideration at all grade levels.

### **Chapter 3: Effective Transition Programs**

In this chapter, I will review the evidence proposed solutions for effective programs resulting from intervention and evaluation studies. It has been suggested comprehensive transition programs collaborate across campuses, adequately prepare students and involve parents throughout the transition process. Consistent communication and a variety of activities address the environmental, academic and social issues presented by the transition to high school. Suggestions will also be provided in regards to implementation and evaluation of existing programs.

Research shows that students who attended schools with explicit transition programs are more likely to experience a smooth transition than those who attend schools without such a program (Smith, 1997). Transition programs are intended to improve student attendance, achievements and retention. (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Multifaceted high school transition programs have been shown to improve retention and academic performance (Smith, 1997; Stein & Husson, 2007). A comprehensive transition program should address the concerns of students and parents in a variety of ways leading to and throughout the transition.

A transition program should include a challenging curriculum, address facilities, safety, discipline, organization and logistics while presenting a committed staff (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Academic, developmental, social and procedural concerns must be addressed (Black, 1999; Schumacher 1998). These programs should provide important logistical information while still respecting the students' experiences of alienation socially and academically as well as organizational expectations (MacIver, 1990; Smith,

2006). It has also been suggested that transition programs should provide accurate expectations to students and parents so as to mitigate the negative impacts of school transitions (Ding, 2008; McAdoo, 1999).

Transition programs should also meet needs specific to the student population. Additional needs beyond the general academic, environmental and social concerns must also be met, and will need to be identified by the transitioning campuses. Such concerns needing to be addressed could include neighborhood violence, a close death or other family problems. Surveys taken of the students could assist in identifying these additional needs as well as general concerns (Bottoms 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). These surveys could also be used to identify students who may be a risk of a particularly challenging transition. By utilizing inventories measuring students' academic motivation and self-regulatory skills, high schools would be able to create transition programs that target the particular needs of the students (Smith, 2006).

Programs must be comprehensive and present activities for students, parents and teachers (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Rice, 2001; Smith, 1997). Existing transition programs that have been successful include at least five types of activities (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; MacIver, 1990). Such programs offer a school visit, meetings involving administration of both campuses to discuss programs and articulation, as well as providing an opportunity to meet with the counselors from both sending and receiving campuses (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; MacIver, 1990). Transition programs can include activities such as having students attend high school classes, hear presentations from older students and being paired with an upperclassman while the students are still in

middle school (Stein & Husson, 2007). Additional suggestions include high school tours, parents' nights, and summer bridge activities (Lys, 2009).

Students and parents should be offered multiple opportunities to discuss, explore, and experience the academic, social and organizational experiences. These occasions should also address the similarities and differences between middle and high school, describe collaboration between schools, and provide parents with logistics as well as resources for academic and social support (Mizelle, 1999; Smith et al., 2008).

The high school and feeder middle schools should collaborate together in developing the cohesive transition program. This is the best way to ensure students' needs are addressed through the transition program's curriculum, providing resources for students, or in establishing small groups to ease the transition process.

#### **COLLABORATION BETWEEN CAMPUSES**

Research identifies collaboration among middle and high school staff as an essential part in meeting the needs of the transitioning students (Mizelle, 1999). In creating and implementing a strong transition program, communication across campuses is vital, especially in identifying the similarities and differences between the two campuses (Smith et al., 2008). Transition planning should focus on communication between the two schools, how to raise expectations for students, amount of academic preparation needed, as well as how to best meet the needs of students who may be of concern (Bottoms, 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). The middle school and high school should cooperate through joint planning meetings with administrators, counselors, teachers, students and parents from all campuses involved (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

All parties involved need to be committed and follow through with communication and expectations (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Weldy, 1991).

High schools and feeder middle schools need to work together to define the key facets of the campus' academic, social and organizational functions (Smith et al., 2008). Research also suggests that schools should clearly explain to students the different roles that the school's guidance counselor(s) play on each campus and how to accommodate for these changes in support (Smith et al., 2008). Additionally, the similarities and differences among the high school and feeder campuses regarding academic expectations need to be identified, quantified if possible and communicated to students and parents (Smith et al., 2008). This is difficult, because each teacher has different expectations, so there is no universal set of expectations for each campus. It may be useful for campuses to create more continuity within each school to assist in the transition across campuses.

Each campus has valuable information to be shared with the other. The middle school should share each student's achievement by core subject, his/her special needs as well as behavior with the high school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). With this information, high schools can have plans in place before school starts to best meet each student's needs. If this information is not shared prior to the start of the new school year, the high school will spend the first grading period trying to identify these needs, and then trying to figure out how to best address them. An additional problem with only using data from high school to identify students problems is that it will be difficult to determine if the need has been ongoing for the child, or is simply a response to the transition to high school. Each of these needs would need to be addressed differently by school staff.

On the other hand, the high school also has valuable information that should be shared with the middle school. The middle school should receive information about the building, programs, services, policies and expectations (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). This information will assist the middle school staff in preparing students and parents. If this information is not provided in great detail, the middle school staff can only do their best and will attempt to prepare students based on what they have heard and remembered. This is unfair to students and parents as well as the staff at both campuses.

There are many ways teachers can support students in bridging the transition. For example, teachers could shadow a teacher at the other campus to learn about the environment and expectations (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997). Additionally, teachers should discuss curriculum and instruction practices between the levels (Marshall, 1992; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Morgan & Hetzog, 2001; Schummacher, 1998). Administration should also shadow on other campus and meet across levels to discuss articulation (Marshall, 1992; Lindsay, 1997; Weldy, 1991).

The guidance counselors from both campuses should work together to assist in smoothing the transition to the new school. For example, middle school counselors should identify students who may be considered at risk and communicate with the counselor as to how best meet the students needs (MacIver, 1990; Schummacher, 1998). It could also be beneficial for the middle school counselor to introduce the child to the new high school counselor as a part of the transfer of services. Meetings should also be scheduled between counselors and special education teachers to share information regarding each student's needs and accommodations (MacIver, 1990; Mizelle & Irvin,

2000). Counselors could utilize parent, student and teacher questionnaires to learn about each student's frustrations, hopes, fears, dreams, strengths and weaknesses; this could inform advising (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001).

Once a clear comprehensive message has been developed regarding the transition experience and what to expect, this should be communicated to the students and parents consistently and regularly. It is suggested that such a style of communication could close the perception gaps students have been shown to have (Smith et al., 2008). Bringing together high school and middle school teachers, counselors and administrators has been shown to be effective when working to ease students' transition experience (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997). Detailed understanding of each campus's programs, courses and requirements ensure that expectations are informed (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997)

Smith, Akos, Lim, and Wiley (2008) found that students reported teachers most consistently as the most important source of support in the transition experience. Since teachers are identified by students as important in the process, it is extremely important that administrators ensure that teachers are accurately informed and are regularly discussing the organizational, social, and academic similarities and differences between the campuses with the students.

District support is needed to increase accessibility of staff on the other campus for the sake of collaboration. Since the hours of the campuses are often different it can be extremely difficult to coordinate. Therefore offering time on days reserved for professional development or substitutes covering classes that would allow the teachers to

meet together or financially support the time teachers spend outside of their contract collaborating with other schools.

Extensive interactions across the middle and high school campuses have shown to be helpful in easing students' transition to high school (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008; Smith et al., 2008). Research stresses that teachers and parents need to be well informed so as to best be able to guide and support students through this difficult time (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). By providing a detailed and consistent message created by both campuses, the transition is made smoother. The information shared across the campuses enables each campus to support the other in meeting the students' needs. This begins with the middle school preparing students based on the information provided by the high school.

#### **PREPARATION**

Preparation for the transition can greatly improve a student's transition experience. The research identifies four dimensions of preparedness which include academic success, independent and industrious work habits, conformity to adult standards and coping mechanisms for such activities as keeping track of assignments and resolving conflicts (Anderson, Jacobs, Schrann & Splittgerber, 2000). The extent of an individual's preparedness would likely determine the type and amount of support that will be needed throughout the transition (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Support is needed from parents, teachers and peers and should be informational, tangible, emotional and social (Anderson et al., 2000). Research suggests students short on preparation, will likely need the most support, and should have access to summer programs, be assigned to the best teachers, as

well as tutors after school home work help, and students with behavior issues should receive counseling or social support from peers (Anderson et al., 2000). It has been indicated that schools ought to clearly identify differences between the campuses since students and parents have not shown in research to fully understand all of the changes to be expected (Smith et al., 2008)

Academically, students are concerned about expectations, so it is important to teach them how to be successful. To do this all teachers must have accurate information; address the information gap, and make sure parents get the accurate information as well (Smith et al., 2008). It has been suggested to better prepare students and parents, information regarding normative achievement loss during the transition should be communicated (Smith, 2006; Alspaugh, 1998b). Parents and students need to be aware of available resources and the new academic challenges presented in high school (Smith, 2006; Akos & Galassi, 2004). Students have reported, after the transition to high school, that they wish their middle school teachers had challenged them more, held them responsible and taught them strategies to be able to learn independently (Mizelle & Mullins, 1997)

Students need to be prepared for first time disappointments in sports, academics, other extracurricular activities (Barber, Eccles & Stone, 2001; Smith et al., 2008). Students, particularly those with a history of high achievement, may need to be prepared for the expected stumble. For example, freshmen may find it difficult to make the sports teams, be first chair in the band or a leadership position in the student council. These positions on some campuses may be more likely to go to upper classmen. Even within

the grade, such as competing for freshmen class president, students will be competing with more students in their own grade than in middle school.

In addition to preparation regarding academics and extracurricular activities, some students may benefit from additional support prior to the transition. The middle school guidance counselor can work with students needing additional support to ensure students are properly prepared for the transition to high school. Group art therapy has been proposed to assist eighth graders in the transition to high school. Spier (2010) utilized this method to assist students at risk of a difficult transition. The objective was to increase the students' coping skills and decrease disruptive behavior. While Spier (2010) only utilized a small sample, the observed results were positive. While positive changes were observed based on the small art therapy group, Spier reported a lack of statistically support due to the study's design. Future research should utilize larger populations to yield additional data that can be statistically analyzed.

Additional research regarding art integration has also yielded positive results. Bush (1997) suggested that it could be the combination of the creativity associated with art and the application of this creativity to the existing challenge can assist students in developing creative problem solving skills. Rosal, McCulloch-Visliser, and Neece (1997) found that the integration of art therapy activities into a school's ninth grade curriculum positively changed some student attitudes towards school, family and self.

Additional interventions have been identified as helpful in the preparation of students for the transition. It has been suggested to offer student panels for question and answer session that could serve as an opportunity to dispel myths about high school

(Mizelle & Mullins, 1997). A spring social at the high school has also been recommended (Mizelle & Mullins, 1997). The social would provide students a chance to meet students from other middle schools that will be at the same high school as well as become increasingly familiar with the campus and administration. Research has also recommended connecting students as pen pals prior to the start of high school (Hertog & Morgan, 1998; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Schumacher, 1998; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Some form of culminating activity upon the completion of middle school is also mentioned in the literature (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). This often looks like a graduation, and it would be worth additional research to see how participation in an elementary or middle school graduation impacts high school graduation rates. Research suggests it would be beneficial to assign students and to teachers or teams before end of school year and encourage contact over the summer (Anderson et al., 2000). This could encourage students to enter high school with an existing sense of belonging to the campus. It has been recommended to send home welcome letters as well as invitations to all transition activities to encourage participation and students' sense of belonging (Schumacher, 1998).

The Community for Learning program is a prevention program at the middle school level where students are assigned to a dedicated teaching team that has a common preparation time, data based staff development, as well as a learning management system focused on developing student responsibility for learning and behavior. The teaching team also works to actively engage family involvement. Students who participated in this

program were less likely to drop out of high school and more likely to maintain grade placement (Oates, Flores & Weishew, 1998).

The transition to high school must begin in middle school. It is the responsibility of the middle schools to assist students, especially those at risk of dropping out, in preparing to enter high school. This includes discussing expectations, developing necessary skills, connecting these students to beneficial resources, and preparing the receiving high schools for how to best anticipate and meet the students' needs. The research also supports the responsibility of middle schools in the transition to high school and the need for further research in this area (Daisey & Jose-Kampfer, 2002; Frymier, 1997; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Lys, 2009).

## **PARENTS**

Research supports educating parents to address parental skills and empower them to help students through the transition process. Even while adolescents are striving to become autonomous, parents are important in a child's education (White-Hood, 2001). Involving parents supports a strong sense of community (White-Hood, 2001).

When parents are involved in the transition program, it is more likely, that they will continue to stay involved on the new campus (MacIver, 1990). Parents may be involved through school work, students' peer networks or direct participation on the school campus. Parents can be involved in students' peer networks by interacting with students in a social context. Parents are able to resolve developmental issues by working as mentors or tutors (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006)

Parents benefit from activities and communication leading into the transition as well as the first part of the new school year. Schools should make sure families are informed about the challenges and demands regarding curriculum, as well as suggest strategies to help students with academics and cope with transition changes (Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000a). This should be done using multiple modes to communicate information leading up to and throughout the transition process.

Schools could invite parents to meet the new campus administration and counselors during the spring semester before the transition. Research has indicated that small groups are better for such discussions as they provide an opportunity to discuss curriculum, policies as well as any other concerns (Marshall, 19992; Mizelle & Irvin 2000; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). An alternative to parents meeting with administration would be to host meetings where parents of incoming students could meet with the parents of older students to learn about challenges to anticipate, insight into peer culture (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). This could be beneficial as seen as a meeting of peers with a common interest, whereas meeting with administration could be seen as intimidating to some parents.

An alternative to formal meetings would be to schedule a more casual event. This could take the form of an open house, picnic or breakfast for students and parents to meet teachers, counselors and administration; this would provide an opportunity for students to ask questions, tour building, visit classrooms and meet teachers (Newman et al., 2000a). Or, the casual open house could be confined with a more formal meeting. Researchers

have suggested having a general invitation to welcome parents to visit school as well as conference with their child's new counselor (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000)

In an attempt to involve all parents, schools should offer a bilingual transition program in the evening where childcare is available or offer programs delivered by diverse paraprofessionals to bridge the cultural barriers (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Lee, 2001). Students whose parents have not already successfully navigated through the US system of education, will likely need additional assistance to understand the system and how it is to be navigated (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Lucas, 2000).

While all parents may not be able to attend events, they can all be included and remain informed through written communication. Schools could mail a school newsletter to incoming parents (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Research has also suggested providing a notebook for incoming parents that would include freshmen course offerings, extracurricular options, registration forms, checklists, brochures, newsletters, school personnel, parent support group information as well as anything else the school administrators believe would be helpful for parents (Lindsay, 1997).

Once students have started high school, parents may still benefit from activities encouraging their involvement on the new campus. Since new questions may arise after the start of the school year, schools could offer weekly parent coffees during the first grading period to discuss policies, as well as an opportunity to problem solve new challenges (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001). Research has also suggested parent education programs, PTA meetings, or retreats to serve as a forum to discuss significant issues and present important information to the school community (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000;

Morgon & Hertzog, 2001; White-Hood, 2001). Special meetings for parents who are learning English as a second language should also be offered (White-Hood, 2001). Once school has started existing PTA members could call and welcome new families to the school (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000; Schummacher, 1998). Additionally, research suggests that staff members of the new school call new families during the first few weeks of school to welcome them and answer questions (Mizelle & Mullins, 1997). Parents may also benefit from a conference with their student and the new counselor (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). This would provide parents along with the student and counselor to assess how the transition and what should be done going forward to return to, or stay on, a positive trajectory.

Involving parents and keeping them informed has shown to be helpful in a student's transition process. Academic and procedural concerns are addressed and a welcoming attitude strengthens the sense of community.

### **TRANSITION ACTIVITIES**

As described, comprehensive transition programs are encouraged to collaborate across campuses, prepare students for high school and involve parents throughout the process. Research suggests specific activities that address these needs as well as environmental, academic and social issues. General transition activities will comprise a significant part of a comprehensive transition program. However, there are also additional concerns that research has shown should be addressed specifically. These activities will likely overlap with additional benefits to the targeted concern.

## **Environmental**

Research has identified procedures that can be modified or implemented that would assist students in the environmental transition to high school. Many of these activities assist in student preparation through the sharing of information, but also support feelings of community as adolescents search for belonging.

The high school could invite students to visit the school and shadow an existing student in the spring prior to the transition (Anderson et al., 2002; Mizelle & Mullins, 2000; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Another event to include in a comprehensive transition program would be a summer orientation. The orientation program could include a tour of the new school, classrooms, provide an opportunity to meet other new students as well as ask questions of students who had recently made a successful transition (McElroy, 2000; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000).

It has been suggested to distribute a handbook to each family one week prior to the start of school that would include important phone numbers, teachers identified by grade level, team and subject, bell schedules, as well as lunch procedures (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997). By providing tangible concrete information, students will have a reference to find answers to questions they may not feel comfortable asking peers or adults on campus.

Then, during the first week of school, students should have an opportunity to have concerns about logistics addressed. Topics such as lockers, organization, and finding classes could be discussed with older students. These older students serving as a resource

could play the role of guide or counselor visiting classes to answer questions (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). An alternative would be to establish a student ambassador program that would strengthen personal ties across grade levels (Lindsay 1997; Schumacher, 1981). A freshmen only first day of school, has also been suggested and will be described later in this chapter (Allen, 2001).

### **Academics**

Students' academic concerns and needs should be addressed in a comprehensive transition program. While there are many interventions designed to support academic success through the transition experience, it begins with course selection. Students need additional assistance from guidance counselors and teachers in course selection so that students are placed in a level where they can be most successful (Smith et al., 2008).

To address the lack of academic preparation, high schools can provide information, in the spring prior to the transition, about academic programs, courses through visits across campuses by students and administration (Anderson et al, 2002; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Mizelle & Mullins, 2000; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Providing students an opportunity to shadow a student in high school and see what classes will be like, can help a student establish realistic expectations and reduce possible anxiety. Administrators visiting the other campus are able to be more informed so that they can ensure their own campus is appropriately bridging the gap between the two campuses.

In addition to visits during the school day, it could be beneficial to hold an open house in the evening. An open house could be scheduled in the fall and spring semesters

for students and parents, to serve as an opportunity to showcase students and activities (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000).

Research suggests varied instructional methods and smaller classes, as well as increased individualized instruction, teacher support, student's times with teachers could all lead to positive changes for a campus (Sommer, Owens & Piliawsky, 2010). A return to cross curricular education could ease the academic transition for students (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). This requires teacher teamwork which would need to be supported by the structure established by the campus's administration. Furthermore, while Manning (2000) found strength in the "integrated and theme based approach" to cross curricular presentations, Carrington (2006) found this attempt to create a cohesive unit inevitable left specialist, or elective, teachers functioning in isolation (Ganesone & Ehrich, 2009).

Some students may not understand the content and skills at the new level (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). For students who do not have the necessary academic foundation to successful in high school, school could encourage or require these students to attend a summer program to improve preparedness (Anderson et al., 2000). It could also be beneficial to assign weak students to the strongest teachers (Anderson et al., 2000). Additional support could be provided by assigned tutors for after school assistance (Anderson et al., 2000). Students that are not prepared to take on all of the academic challenges of high school, may benefit from a reduced course load (Newman et al., 2000b).

An academic skills class has been suggested that would cover coping, study, and organizational skills (Newman et al., 2000b; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Such skills

could empower students in handling the changes as well as providing a continual source of information on how to apply and develop the skills. A similar study suggests schools identify students considered to be at risk, and place them in special sociology class that teaches study skills, organizational methods, self discipline, tolerance, diversity awareness, anger managements and other relevant topics (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Then, in the second year of high school, students would enroll in a special study skills class where half of the class time is spent on academic study and other half on community service. In the study, the third and fourth year students would often return as mentors to ninth graders. This study yielded increased standardized test scores, reduced administrative referrals and improved attendance. Furthermore, the sophomore failure rate was reduced by about two thirds (Bland & Breslin, 2005).

The availability of early intervention opportunities for academic recovery has been shown to be helpful (Neild et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2008). The option to earn lost credits before too many accumulate could prevent students from getting so far behind that graduation seems out of reach. While students may veer off the positive trajectory during the transition to high school, an early opportunity of return to a path towards success, could make a significant difference in a student's future.

Several studies identified existing middle school programs that focused on preparing students for academic success. Mizelle and Mullins (1997) recommend a curriculum that is more hands on, life related, involving learning activities, integrated instruction and cooperative learning. The students who participated in the hands on curriculum were more successful in transitioning to high school than those that did not.

The challenging curriculum helped students develop learning strategies, and learn to be responsible for their own learning, which helped them enter high school with increased self confidence (Mizell & Mullins, 1997).

### **Social**

As described earlier, social issues are a part of the transition process. Research recommends strengthening social support networks through peer mentoring and building supportive peer cultures (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Additional activities that could help strengthen social support would be mentor programs using older students as the mentors, a spring social prior to the transition, pen pal programs, as well as freshmen awareness groups (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) describe a peer mediation group where an upperclassman served as a Peer Support leader to a group of ten first year students. This program allowed for the first year students to form friendships with peers in a small group setting. Furthermore, the older Peer Support leader provided “friendly and informative support” helping to ease the transition for the first year students and increase their feelings of safety. Ganesone and Ehrich (2009) also mention a private area on the campus exclusively for first year students, but do not clearly elaborate how it is used, though report a reduction of stress for students in the new environment.

While peer mentors may be more approachable or relatable, research indicates that adult mentors can have a significant impact on student success. When students see their teachers as supportive, they also tend to have positive perceptions of the school climate and strong academic motivation (Frey et al., 2009). Students need to feel

connected to at least one adult on the campus (Smith, 2006). This adult could be a guidance counselor, coach, extracurricular activity sponsor, teachers or other advisors. Professional development should be offered to prepare these adults for how to serve as a mentor and make positive connections with students (Smith, 2006). Every student must have at least one important adult that is invested in the child's academic and personal success and knows how to support the child (Newman et al., 2000a). Low achievers often have a narrow range of supporters, such as parents who do not provide monitoring or encouragement. Teachers are needed to fill these voids (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Newman et al., 2000a).

### **Diverse Population Considerations**

The literature does provide suggestions as to how to support culturally diverse populations through the transition process. As described early in this paper, it is essential that educators understand acculturation issues and respect all cultures of origin. Suggestions include a multicultural curriculum and stress the importance of the role of the school guidance counselor in educating staff while supporting students.

When working with students who are learning English as a second language, it is important that educators are mindful of the number of transitional experiences these students are going through (Lucas, 2000). In addition to the school and physical transitions, the sociocultural transition can pose challenges that impact the academic environment (Lucas, 2000). Lucas (2000) suggests efforts be made to reduce tracking, develop multicultural curriculum, promote culturally and linguistically responsive instructional practices, involve students in the decision making about their own learning.

Lucas does not describe how these efforts should occur such as strategies to be implemented or define a multicultural curriculum. In order to empower administrators to respond to current research suggests, specifics are needed so that the changes can be implemented.

In establishing a multicultural curriculum, it is suggested that teachers should select diverse literature and educating the entire student population on a variety of cultures. This can assist students in seeing ties across cultures and potentially break down existing barriers (Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2010). In addition to supporting students individual cultures, this could improve relationships across cultures on campus supporting the desired sense of community.

In the role of student advocate, a culturally responsive counselor can take action to eliminate barriers and cultural insensitivities (Lee, 2001). This can be done by promoting the development of positive self-identities and diverse interpersonal relationships as well as encouraging academic achievement, attitude and skills for success (Lee, 2001). Such changes begin with the school staff; the counselor can assist campus staff in identifying cultural blind spots and then assisting the staff in developing cultural sensitive practices (Lee, 2001).

Lys (2009) identifies Latino males as needing additional academic and social support, suggesting that this could support these students view regarding earning a high school diploma. Understanding school limitations, Lys (2000) suggests schools partner with community resources to help support students needing additional support.

Daisey and Jose-Kampfner (2002) suggest teachers incorporate biographical storytelling into instruction. While the suggestion is for use with Latina middle school students, the use of biographical storytelling would be beneficial for any student group that appears to be underrepresented in fields or success stories included in curriculum. This can encourage positive self images for the students and improve student teacher relationships in honoring different cultures (Daisey & Jose-Kampfner, 2002).

Ostering et al. (1999) stresses the importance of family and community involvement in Latino students' success. As described earlier parent involvement is an important part of the transition process. While suggestions are provided regarding interventions to support diverse populations through the transition to high school academically and socially, additional research is needed to best meet the needs of the students.

### **RESTRUCTURING CONSIDERATIONS**

Some schools attempt a significant environmental intervention. Implementing a school within a school concept, providing ninth graders with a separate section of the school building, as a part of a comprehensive transition program, showed an increase in student promotion, reduction in dropouts and increase passing rates on math standardized testing (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Allen (2001) suggests that the school within a school concept prevents students from getting lost or overwhelmed, and provides additional support and academic attention, and space to mature as well as fosters closer peer relationships. Additionally, Rourke (2001) reported a reduction in truancy, and suspension rates, as well as increased participation in honors classes. Additionally, staff

reported that they felt students better managed emotions and academic difficulties so that students were better prepared for tenth grade (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

Some schools go beyond a transition program, and create an entirely separate campus or center exclusively for ninth graders (Reents, 2002). The freshmen center concept has shown to create a sense of community, ease academic and social transition issues and implement instructional strategies that are more similar to those of a middle school than high school, such as teaming (Alspaugh, 1998a; Smith et al., 2008). Currently, there is little research on the impact of freshmen centers (Smith et al., 2008).

A smaller scale alternative would be a freshmen only first day of school (Lindsay, 1997). Students meet in auditorium for an assembly with administration, the student body president, and faculty, where they are introduced to rules, rituals and values of the school (Lindsay, 1997). Welcome banners direct students to their homerooms, where they review the school handbook, discuss expectations, and take care of locker issues (Lindsay, 1997). Student follow their schedule and meet their new teachers. Lunch is a cook out for socialization (Lindsay, 1997). The whole day is video taped and a ten minute compilation video is presented at end of day during a student/parent assembly (Lindsay, 1997). At the end of the day, students complete an evaluation of their experience (Lindsay, 1997). When implemented, students and parents have provided positive feedback regarding the experience and structure of the day (Lindsay, 1997). While the positive feedback demonstrates that a freshmen only first day of school established positive relationships, additional research is needed to assess the long term impact.

## **IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION**

The transition program, while focused most during the second semester of eighth grade and the first semester of ninth grade, cannot end once students have made the transition. It is also important that students also be transitioned out of the transition program and equipped for independence. Exiting students from the program should be a gradual process so as to ensure post program success.

It has been suggested to hold parent orientation, visits to the new school as well as discussion sessions with current high school students in the winter or spring before the transition (Arrowsafe & Irvin, 1992; Rice, 2001). Over the summer additional opportunities for discussion regarding course articulation as well as offering summer classes (Diemert, 1992).

Continuous planning makes for the most effective programs (Bottoms, 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Specific and measureable school action plans have also been recommended as a starting point when focusing student success through transition (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). Those involved in the planning of the program should meet regularly to review, evaluate and revise current practice. The evaluation should include teachers, students, parents and administration (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). This is an opportunity for high school teachers and students to identify weaknesses in preparation and existing programs based on their personal experience. Schools collect data on student and parent perceptions can inform of current work. Such research would shed light on the schools consistency, value and impact of transition programs and material (Smith et al., 2006).

Taken together, this research demonstrates how issues regarding the transition to high school can be addressed. Collaboration across campuses, preparing students and involving parents are suggested. Additionally, activities targeting environmental, academic and social concerns are proposed. Suggestions for implementation and evaluation of programs are provided. While existing research detail issues and proposes how these can be addressed, there is still a need for additional research.

## **Chapter 4: Discussion**

Further research is needed to improve current understanding of the middle to high school transition experience. There is very little research to be found evaluating existing middle to high school transition programs (Frey et al., 2009; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Smith et al., 2006). Information is needed on the quality and efficacy of existing transition programs (Mizelle, 1999; Smith, 2006).

Research is most notably absent regarding diverse populations. There are multiple variables to be investigated including race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and sexual orientation. While there is little in the literature regarding the impact of cultures on the transition experience, the existing literature often fails to differentiate between different populations.

Student socioeconomic status has yet to be explored. Existing research mentions this variable rarely. When socioeconomic status is included in current research, it is always connected to another variable such as race, at-risk classification or urban location (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Fustenberg & Neumark, 2007; Mosley & Lex, 1990; Newman et al., 2000a; Osterling, et al., 1999; Seidman et al., 1994). This variable needs to be examined independently, so that educators know how to support this population through the transition.

Similarly, current research does little to address cultural differences in the transition process. Students are treated as a homogeneous group without consideration of cultural and ethnic groups (Lys, 2009). On the occasion when attention is given to a single ethnicity, such as Latinos, there is no distinction in the literature between recent

immigrants and those whose families having been in the United States for generations. Each population will experience the transition to high school differently, and research is needed to investigate how educators can support diverse populations and each students' unique needs. Much of the existing research fails to even mention cultural considerations when examining results or providing suggestions. In addition to ethnic groups, other cultural factors ought to be explored in relationship to the transition to high school, such as the impact of different family constellations (Isakson & Jarvis, 2009).

The evaluations available utilize small sample sizes (Smith et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2006). These samples also do not appear to reflect the wide variety of schools and student populations in the United States. In addition to narrow samples, the existing evaluations focus on a single construct of the transition experience while acknowledging that the transition experience is multifaceted and each construct can impact the others. While self reports are considered a valid source of information, many studies use this as the only source of data which can certainly skew the real issue (Frey et al., 2009).

Research appears to be contradictory in regards to the benefits of ninth grade centers. Research suggests that the relocation of ninth grade to a separate campus increased student promotion, reduced dropouts and improved passing rates on math standardized testing (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). On the other hand, the addition of an additional campus that students will transition to and from could increase achievement lost and dropout rates based on the results of Alspaugh (1998b). Additional research is needed to identify the costs and benefits of the ninth grade center model.

The stage environment fit theory appears to have only been applied to the transition from elementary to middle school (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). While much of the theory appears to be able to be translated to the transition to high school, studies to document the application are needed. Such a study would be able to detail the specific needs of the students' stages as they transition to high school. The student stages are different between the two transitions; therefore the requirements of the environments would also be different. In order to apply the theory on the high school level, a clear description and rationale for the most appropriate environment is needed.

It would be beneficial for researchers to explore the impacts of ecological factors, feelings of connectedness, self-esteem, achievement and motivation on students' transition experience and high school success (Akos & Galassi, 2004). More longitudinal designs from more diverse populations (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Additional research exploring how to promote students sense of belonging, or connectedness to the school would be beneficial (Frey et al., 2009).

Current school organization reforms appear to be based on trends as opposed to theory or research (Smith et al., 2008). Researchers identify the need for statewide analysis of the multiple variables and how they impact students' outcomes, particularly in regards to ninth grade achievement and graduation rate (Smith et al., 2008). Information drawn from these analysis studies should then be used to inform decisions about the key issues on the campus, district and state policy levels.

Additional research is necessary for an increased understanding of the different trends regarding students making the transition to high school. Since students will

respond to the same experience differently, identifying subgroups or profiles would allow for schools to be able to uniquely address students' needs.

Research on general education transitions is still in the early stages (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Mizelle, 1999; Smith et al., 2008). This is especially true regarding the middle to high school transition. This review of current literature identifies areas of concern as well as possible interventions to assist students in making a smooth transition from middle to high school. Concerns and interventions focus on the school environment, academics and community. Multicultural issues are also examined, highlighting the need for additional research. The current research can be applied to schools to address identified issues and augment existing programs to assist students in navigating the transition from middle to high school.

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