

EFFECTS OF SUMMER SCHOOL TRANSITION PROGRAM AND GRADE LEVEL  
ON SEVENTH, EIGHTH, AND NINTH GRADE STUDENTS' GRADES,  
ATTENDANCE, AND BEHAVIOR

by

Katie Elizabeth Smith

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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## **ABSTRACT**

This causal-comparative study sought to identify the effects of attending a summer school transition program and students' grade levels (seventh v. eighth v. ninth) on students' grades (based on course failures), attendance (based on students' absences), and behavior (based on number of behavioral office referrals). The students who participated in this study were identified as at-risk during one of three educational transitions: from elementary school to middle school, between seventh and eighth grade in the middle school, and from middle school to high school. As part of their elementary school to middle school, intra-middle school, or middle school to high school transition program, students in the treatment group participated in a three-week summer program with academic classes in math, reading, and science, which their upcoming grade-level teacher taught. The goals of the summer transition program include familiarizing students with new academic structures and teacher expectations as well as previewing curriculum material for the upcoming school year. In order to compare the groups' data, the researcher used the chi-square analysis. While there was no change in students' grades or behavior related to participation in the summer transition program, statistically significant relationships did exist between grade level and attendance for eighth and ninth grade students, as well as students who did not attend the summer school transition program. Grade level did not have a significant impact on the change in students' grades or behavior from one year to the next.

*Key Terms:* transition, ninth grade transition, at-risk students, transition programs

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing family, who has supported me throughout the doctoral process. To my loving husband, Mark, you have traveled this journey with me and been by my side throughout this process. You are an amazing man, and your support and encouragement keeps me going. To my sweet little boys, Noah and Robert, you have given me many smiles and moments to laugh, not to mention the gift of naptime for me to get my work done. To my wonderful parents, your support has helped make this whole thing possible. It is truly an amazing blessing to be surrounded by such a loving family each day.

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## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
List of Tables.....	viii
List of Abbreviations.....	x
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Purpose.....	5
.....	5
Research Questions and Null Hypotheses.....	5
Background Information.....	7
Summer School Transition Program.....	7
Grades.....	8
Attendance.....	9
Behavior.....	10
Student Grade Level.....	11
Relevance of Study.....	12
Summary.....	13
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	15
Introduction.....	15
Theoretical Framework.....	16
Legislation.....	17
Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.....	17
College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI).....	21
At-Risk Students.....	22
Adolescence.....	25
Ninth Grade.....	27
School Organization.....	29
Perspectives on Transition.....	34
The Problem with Dropouts.....	35
Early Warning Signs: Distress Signals of High School Dropouts.....	38
Factors Associated with Dropouts.....	42
Characteristics of Transitional Programs.....	45
Freshman Academies.....	47
The Importance of Relationships.....	49
Problems with Transition.....	52
Effects of Transitional Programs.....	53
Conclusion.....	57
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	60
Research Design.....	60
Research Questions and Null Hypotheses.....	62

Variables .....	64
Setting, Sample, and Participants.....	66
Setting .....	66
Sample.....	68
Participants.....	69
Justification for Sample .....	69
Data Collection Procedures.....	70
Data Analysis Procedures .....	70
Ethical Considerations .....	71
Summary of Methodology .....	71
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS.....	73
Descriptive Statistics.....	73
Findings .....	77
Research Question 1 .....	77
Research Question 2 .....	81
Research Question 3 .....	84
Research Question 4 .....	87
Research Question 5 .....	90
Research Question 6 .....	92
Summary.....	95
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	97
Restatement of the Research Questions and Null Hypotheses.....	97
Summary of Findings.....	98
Student Attendance .....	98
Student Grades .....	99
Student Behavior.....	101
Discussion of Findings.....	102
Limitations .....	103
Implications .....	106
Recommendations for Future Research .....	108
Conclusion .....	111
REFERENCES .....	113
Appendix A: IRB Approval.....	128

## List of Tables

Table 1: Frequencies and Percentages for Number of Students by Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Intervention Attendance (Did Attend vs. Did Not Attend) .....	73
Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations for Absences, Failures, and Referrals Prior to and After the Intervention .....	75
Table 3: Frequencies and Percentages for Intervention Attendance (Did vs. Did Not) by Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth).....	76
Table 4: Frequencies and Percentages for the Trend (Decreased vs. No Change vs. Increased) in Absences, Failures, and Referrals by Grade Level .....	77
Table 5: Chi-Square (Test-of-Independence) on Intervention Attendance (Did Not Attend vs. Did Attend) and Absence Change .....	79
Table 6: Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Intervention Attendance (Did Not Attend vs. Did Attend) and Absence Trend.....	80
Table 7: Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Intervention Attendance (Did Not Attend vs. Did Attend) and Failure Change .....	82
Table 8: Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Intervention Attendance (Did Not Attend vs. Did Attend) and Failure Trend .....	83
Table 9: Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Intervention Attendance (Did Not Attend vs. Did Attend) and Referral Change.....	85
Table 10: Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Intervention Attendance (Did Not Attend vs. Did Attend) and Referral Trend .....	86
Table 11: Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Absence Change .....	88
Table 12: Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Absence Trend .....	89
Table 13: Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Failure Change.....	91
Table 14: Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Failure Trend .....	92



Table 15: Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Referral Change ..... 93

Table 16: Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Referral Trend..... 95

### **List of Abbreviations**

AYP: Adequate Yearly Progress – Measurement of a schools performance with regard to the mandates of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*.

CCRPI: College and Career Ready Performance Index – Proposed alternative method for measuring AYP in the state of Georgia.

CRCT: Criterion Reference Competency Test – State mandated curriculum test for Georgia students in elementary and middle school.

EOCT: End of Course Test – Cumulative curriculum test mandated for certain high school credit courses in the state of Georgia.

GADOE: Georgia Department of Education.

NCLB: No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 – Legislation originally passed in 2001 which mandates all students be academically proficient by the year 2014.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The move from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school is full of change for students. In addition to moving to a new physical building, most students are faced with new teachers, new classes, and new peers among other transitional issues. Moreover, students are learning to navigate a new educational environment. Eighth grade students worry about other issues such as navigating the physical environment of the new school, the increasing volume and complexity of the work expected in high school, and troublesome behavior from upper classmen (Cushman, 2006).

Of particular interest to educational researchers, is the transition to high school and the academic struggles freshmen experience in high school. According to Hertzog and Morgan (1998), ninth grade students have higher rates of failures and behavior problems that result in suspension or expulsion when compared to other high school grade levels. A connection has also been established between eighth grade behavior and ninth grade academic performance (Braun, Cochrane, Flannery, McIntosh, & Sugai, 2008). In light of the rising high school dropout rate, which is currently around 500,000 students per year, the academic performance of freshman students is a concern (Holstrom, 2000). Research estimated that every nine seconds a student drops out of high school (Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008) and close to 1, 200,000 students who entered high school in 2002 did not graduate in four years, either dropping out or needing additional time to complete the high school diploma requirements (Edwards & Edwards, 2007).

Middle schools are generally unique in that they must guide students through the

transition process twice and in a relatively short amount of time. First, students come to the middle school from elementary school; in this study students entered the middle school in seventh grade after completing sixth grade in an elementary school. Then eighth grade students transitioned to the high school for ninth grade. This means that middle schools and their students' experience frequent changes over just two school years. In order to reduce the problems associated with transition, middle schools need to create proactive programs that prepare students to transition to high school. Transitional programs can include school visits, student speakers, meetings with school counselors, and many other interventions. Smith (1997) found that students attending schools with well-developed and established transitional programs had more academic success than students who attended schools that lack well-developed transition programs.

Transitions that take place in succession, and within a short period of time, can be difficult for students; moreover, these transitions can be more difficult for those students who are considered at risk, academically and socially (Alspaugh, 2011). There are several reasons for determining if a student is at risk, including educational performance, socioeconomic status, and familial characteristics. The following factors increase the likelihood of labeling a student as at risk: minority status, poverty status, limited English proficiency, single-parent families, behavioral problems, high course failure rates, poor standardized test scores, and grade retention (Downing & Harrison, 1990; Miller, 2003; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989)

In 1983, the United States Department of Education's report, *A Nation at Risk*, prompted Congress to investigate the America's educational system. The report underscored the prevalence of illiteracy, poor standardized test scores, and low graduation rates in America's schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education,

1983). The report sparked an interest in tracking students' educational progress and examining the factors that contributed to the low graduation rates. In response to this report, Congress passed legislation to improve educational results during the 1980s and 1990s. However, The Center for Educational Reform's 1998 report, *A Nation Still at Risk*, found the dropout rate did not change.

In 2001, Congress and President Bush authorized a comprehensive educational reform, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), mandating that all students perform at or above grade level by the conclusion of the 2013-14 school year (No Child Left Behind, 2001). The NCLB utilizes the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measurement, which includes multiple indicators, to determine a school's progress towards meeting its mandate that all students demonstrate proficiency on standardized assessments. In addition to requiring 100% proficiency on standardized tests, NCLB measures a high school's on-time high school graduation rate. Under the NCLB mandates, high schools must track and report their yearly graduation rate and demonstrate growth towards the 2014 goal of 100% proficiency (United States Government Accountability Office, 2005).

Due to NCLB's increasing AYP targets, which are 100% proficiency by the conclusion of the 2013-14 school year, state department of education agencies are applying for a waiver from NCLB's requirements. In 2011, the Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) applied for a federal waiver from NCLB's AYP measurements. In order to close any existing gaps in a school's NCLB's benchmarks, the GADOE proposed the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) to determine AYP, which combines achievement and progress indicators with the closure of any existing gaps in students' achievement (Georgia Department of Education, 2011).

As a result of NCLB's student achievement and high school graduation rate

requirements, there is a need for schools to base their financial decisions on numerical data and students educational needs. Of particular importance are the educational needs of students who are considered at-risk of failing or dropping out of school. Following an educational transition, students' academic achievement typically declines (Alspaugh, 2011; Barber & Olsen, 2004). Students cited their poor academic achievement as the main reason for dropping out of school (Jerald, 2006). With this in mind, school must implement effective programs that encourage students to complete their high school education, regardless of their post-secondary aspirations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem is students are academically, behaviorally, or socially unprepared as they transition from elementary to middle school and later from middle to high school, with the ninth grade year being when students are most likely to get behind and consider dropping out of school (Alspaugh, 1998; Smith, 1997). High school dropout rates are increasing at an alarming rate. In order to ease the chaos that accompanies the transition from middle school to high school, many high schools have instituted practices such as freshman academies. These programs can have positive results on students' performance, both academically and behaviorally, as students need to prepare for the challenges they will face during school transitions (Chmelynski, 2004).

Effective transition is not a one-sided reactive approach that is confined to the receiving school. Instead, elementary and middle schools, particularly in the year leading up to a major transition, should proactively prepare their students to complete a smooth transition to a new school. As early as sixth grade, clear indicators exist as to which students are most likely to disengage and later dropout of school (Balfanz, Hertzog, & Mac Iver, 2007).

In light of state and federal requirements, including NCLB and Georgia's proposed CCRPI, school systems must ensure students are making academic progress and graduating from high school. Current research investigating students who are considered at-risk for dropping out of school provides educational officials information to guide the implementation of programs that assist at-risk students.

### **Purpose**

The United States of America is experiencing a crisis in regard to the number of students who fail to complete high school. The adolescent years include numerous changes, including the change in educational environments (Felner, Farber, & Primavera, 1983). The dropout crisis has sparked research in the field of educational transition. Research found that students become disengaged with education during the middle school and early high school years, which coincides with the important transition from one school to the next (Swanson, 2005). This problem reaches its peak during the ninth grade year as students typically transition from the middle school environment to the high school environment. Warning signs that begin to emerge in middle school include poor school attendance, behavior problems, and course failures (Balfanz et al., 2007). The purpose of this causal-comparative study was to determine if participation in a summer school transition program and the students' grade level had an impact on students' grades, attendance, or behavior.

### **Research Questions and Null Hypotheses**

The following research questions guided this research study and helped formulate the corresponding null hypotheses:

**Research Question 1.** How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' attendance when compared to students who were invited but

did not attend?

*Null hypothesis 1.* There will be no difference in the attendance of students before and after they attended the summer school transitional program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.

**Research question 2.** How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' grades when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?

*Null hypothesis 2.* There will be no difference in the number of course failures of students before and after attending the summer school transitional program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.

**Research question 3.** How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' behavior when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?

*Null hypothesis 3.* There will be no difference in the number of behavior referrals for students before and after they attended the summer school transition program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.

**Research question 4.** How did students' grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) impact students' attendance?

*Null hypothesis 4.* There will be no difference in students' attendance based on grade level.

**Research question 5.** How did the students' grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) impact students' grades?

*Null hypothesis 5.* There will be no difference in the students' course failures based on grade level.



**Research question 6.** How did students' grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) impact students' behavior?

**Null hypothesis 6.** There will be no difference in the number of behavior referrals for students based on grade level.

This causal-comparative study analyzed pre-existing school data. School personnel selected the students who participated in summer transition program. Students, in conjunction with their parents, self-selected membership in either the treatment group of program attendees or the control group of students who did not attend the summer school transition program. A causal-comparative design is most appropriate as this study examined pre-existing data for a cause and effect relationship (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2006). Further information regarding this study's research design can be found in Chapter 3.

## **Background Information**

### **Summer School Transition Program**

Summer school transition program refers to a three-week summer workshop which selected students attended. Teachers and administrators identified students who were likely to benefit from the program based on their course grades, participation in remedial education program (REP) classes, scores on the Georgia Criterion Reference Competency Test (GCRCT), or teachers' recommendations. The school district utilized its allotted Title I money to fund the program, which was provided free of cost to the students who participated. It included daily bus transportation to and from the school each day, as well as a no-cost breakfast and lunch to all participating students. The program operated for five hours each day from 8:00am to 1:00pm and consisted of three academic classes: mathematics, reading/language arts, and science.

Participating students were rising seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students. Rising seventh grade students were entering the middle school for the first time the school year following the program as all participating elementary feeder schools house sixth grade. Rising eighth grade students were transitioning from seventh to eighth grade within the same school building. Rising ninth grade students were transitioning from eighth grade in the middle school to ninth grade at the high school. At each grade level, teachers taught students during the summer prior to having them during the regular school year; for example, seventh grade teachers taught the rising seventh grade students in the summer prior to entering seventh grade. Middle school teachers taught the rising seventh and eighth graders while high school teachers came to the middle school to teach the rising ninth grade students. In addition to content area teachers in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science, the staff also included an English Language Learners (ELL) specific teacher and special education teachers who team taught content classes for students with disabilities.

## **Grades**

Grades are the cumulative course average students earn in each of their academic content areas. This study did not evaluate students' numeric averages; instead students' grades were recorded as passing or failing for each subject. For each academic class, elementary and middle school grades student receive a year-long grade for each academic class at the end of the school year. Elementary and middle school students receive a year-long-grade in each of the following courses: language arts, science, and social studies; in addition, they receive quarterly grades in the following elective courses: physical education, art, music, computer applications, family and consumer sciences, or other school offered connections classes. The schools use quarterly data from each nine-week

grading period to calculate a student's final year-long course grade. To do this, the school averages a student's first and second nine-week grades to determine a first semester average.

Next, the school averages a student's third and fourth nine-week grades to determine a second semester average. Finally, the school averages a student's first and second semester grades to determine his or her final course grade. The school reports high school students' grades each semester. Based on a passing semester grade, students earn one-half credit toward graduation. In Georgia, certain high school courses require students to take a state mandated End of Course Test (EOCT) during the second semester of the course. In the State of Georgia, students' EOCT scores account for 20% of their second semester grade. Each semester, the school reports students' grades as a cumulative semester average. Unlike the elementary and middle schools, which begin grade calculations anew each nine-week quarter, high school semester grades are calculated continuously throughout the semester. Therefore, students' semester grades are not the result of averaging their two quarterly grades. High school students receive course credit as they receive passing grades each semester. High school students are eligible to receive up to six credits during each school year, earning any fewer than six credits indicates a course failure. As a result of earning one-half credit for each course they pass during a semester, high school students can fail one semester of a course and receive only one-half credit for a full year of instruction. Passing grades in the state of Georgia are 70% or better for all grade levels.

### **Attendance.**

Attendance is the number of days a student is present at school. The school district's information system tracks students' attendance. To receive attendance credit,

students must be present in the school for at least half of the school day. The school district has designated 11:30 a.m. as the half-way point of the school day for all levels. Students arriving at school before 11:30 a.m. or checking out after this time are given full attendance credit for the day. Elementary and middle schools consider attendance as a daily statistic. In order to measure students' attendance, this study used the number of absences a student had in a school year, whether the absence was excused or unexcused. This allowed for variances in the number of days students were both enrolled and out of school due to inclement weather or budgetary furlough days. High school attendance is recorded as both the number of days in attendance at school and the number of course-specific days in attendance, meaning that a student attended school but did not attend specific courses. This study analyzed school attendance and not course-specific absences.

### **Behavior**

The number of teacher or administrator generated office referrals, as recorded in the school district's student information system, measured the students' behavior. The school district's discipline policy utilizes a progressive discipline approach, meaning that when they consider the punishment for a specific discipline infraction, the school district considers the students' infraction as well as their discipline history. According to the school district discipline code:

Good order and discipline may be described as the absence of distractions and disturbances, which interfere with the optimum functioning of the student, the classroom, the school, and the safe operation of school buses. It is also the presence of a friendly, yet businesslike, rapport in which students and school personnel work cooperatively toward mutually accepted goals. (Cherokee County School District Discipline Code, 2011, p. 1)

While the Student Discipline Code Handbook outlines specific behavior infractions and possible resulting consequences, specific consequences are only mandated for illegal infractions including weapon or drug possession. The handbook provides guidelines, but school administrators make school-based disciplinary decisions. With this in mind, local school administration enforces classroom discipline and determines the resulting consequences. Discipline consequences could include student-teacher conferences, loss of privileges, detentions, parent conferences, in-school or out-of-school suspension, or expulsion. The school district operates on an expectation of respect from all parties—students, parents, and employees—toward the entire educational process

### **Student Grade Level**

With regard to the students' grade levels, this study utilized the grade level the students entered in the school year following the summer school transition program. For example, if teachers recommended that students participate in the summer school transitional program during their sixth grade academic year, then these students attended the program prior to starting seventh grade. Next, the researcher compared the sixth grade students' grades, attendance, and behavior to their seventh grade performance in these areas.

Similarly, if teachers recommended that students participate in the summer transitional program during their seventh grade academic year, then these students attended the program prior to starting eighth grade. This study compared the seventh grade students' grades, attendance, and behavior to their eighth grade performance in these areas. Finally, if teachers recommended that students participate in the summer transitional program during their eighth grade academic year, then these students attended

the program prior to starting ninth grade. This study compared the eighth grade students' grades, attendance, and behavior to their ninth grade performance in these areas

**Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.** Title 1 provides improved educational opportunities for students who live in economically disadvantaged areas. It states, "All children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (United States Department of Education, *Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, 2010, p.1). The elementary schools and the middle school participating in this study have obtained Title I designation. The participating high school does not hold Title I designation, although its primary feeder school does hold Title I designation.

### **Relevance of Study**

The results of this study could provide both school district and school administrators with valuable data. Planning and implementing the summer school transition program requires a considerable amount of resources, including administrator and teacher time, financial support, transportation, cafeteria services, custodial services, and student materials. In the face of increasing budgetary constraints, a thorough evaluation of the program's effects on students' grades, attendance, and behavior could allow district level administrators to utilize available funding in an appropriate manner and expand the program to serve other schools or other groups of students if it is successful.

Wheelock and Miao (2005) advocated for summer acceleration programs to ease the transition from middle school to high school for rising freshmen. This study builds upon that idea with a transition program focused on students who teachers identified as

at-risk. Schools with students who experienced two or more transitions had a higher dropout rate than schools with students who had only one transition, and smaller groups or learning cohorts may result in better outcomes for students during a school transitions (Alspaugh, 2011). Summer school transition programs have the potential to support at-risk students during each educational transition they experience from elementary school through middle school and into high school. These programs provide students with small group learning experiences in which they build relationships with both teachers and other students.

Finally, this study sought to provide data in an area Hertzog and Morgan (1998) identified as lacking research and literature. Specifically, Hertzog and Morgan found a lack of literature regarding specific transitional programs addressing the move from the middle school to high school. This study includes research data from educational transitions from elementary school through the entrance to high school, including the transition from middle school to high school.

### **Summary**

This study provided the school district with student data to evaluate the effectiveness of a summer school transition program on students' grades, attendance, and behavior. This study focused on students who school district officials identified as at-risk for academic failure. The current economic climate has forced the school district to make budgetary reductions in many areas. In order to provide a summer school transitional program at no cost to students, funding is required to transport students to and from school, feed students breakfast and lunch, pay teacher salaries for the program's duration, provide materials and supplies, and pay the associated costs of using a school facility – cafeteria use, custodians, and air conditioning. This study's findings could influence a

future decision in regard to funding the summer transitional program. In summary, this study's findings contribute to the body of research focusing on educational transitional programs and students' transition between schools.

Chapter one of this study introduced the topic of this study, provided background information regarding the problem, stated this study's purpose, and included this study's guiding research questions, with a corresponding null hypothesis for each research question. Background information are included as well to aid the readers' understanding of the discussion. The second chapter of this manuscript provides a review of related literature on this topic including the following: (a) relevant theories, (b) educational legislation in regard to school performance, (c) the characteristics of students considered at-risk, (d) the importance of the ninth grade year for future academic success, (e) the problems associated with high school dropouts, (f) the warning signs students send prior to dropping out of school, (g) characteristics and perspectives on transition and transitional programs, (h) the importance of relationships in educational settings, and (i) the effects of various transitional programs. Chapter three explains this study's methodology, research design, setting, sample, participants, data collection and analysis procedures as well as ethical considerations. The fourth chapter of this manuscript contains the data collected and a detailed discussion of the findings based on each research question. Chapter five of this study provides a final summary and discussion of the findings as well as the implications of this study and recommendations for future research.



## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Introduction

The transition from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school is difficult for students. The change is overwhelming, and the new found freedoms, along with the pressure to learn and adapt to new academic and social structures, distracts students from concentrating on academics. By carefully planning and implementing effective transitional programming, schools can alleviate the stress associated with such transitions, both prior to the transition and during the educational year following the transition. Schiller (1999) defined transition as “a process during which institutional and social factors influence students’ educational careers are positively or negatively affected by the movement between organizations” (p. 216-217). This transitional time is marked by both excitement and fear in adolescents (Mizelle, 2005). One key to assisting students during these transitional periods is a successful transition program that promotes student success and preparation for the coming changes. Such programs must include school personnel, parents, and students at all levels. In discussing the importance of strong transitional programming, Irvin and Mizell (2005) stated the following:

They need to recognize that helping young adolescents make a successful transition into high school involves elementary, middle, and high school teachers working together with parents and students to structure their program and curriculum so that young adolescents experience a seamless transition (Irvin & Mizelle, 2005, p. 59).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Educational transitions are fraught with stresses and potential problems for students, including academic and social loss (Alspaugh, 1998). In a transitional period marked by the potential for loss, schools search for methods and programs to assist students as they move from one school or grade level to the next (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998). In 1989, Albert Bandura described his theory of efficacy, which is built upon the notion that success lays the foundation for further success and builds upon itself as the student progresses through school (Bandura, 1989). This theory of efficacy is important during the transitional periods from elementary school to middle school and middle school to high school because he noted the theory and its converse are both true: just as success can build success, failure can lead to failure. This theory of efficacy can be extrapolated and applied directly to educational transitions; furthermore, success during the transitional years can increase the potential for success through high school graduation and beyond. Therefore, the importance of a successful start in a new school following a transition is of great importance to each student's future success (Bandura, 1989).

Interestingly, the notion that performance during the freshman year can greatly impact and influence the rest of a student's high school career is not unique to Bandura's theory. Students who were academically successful during their ninth grade year were more successful throughout high school than those who struggled academically during the same time period (Blankstein, 2004). Conversely, students who faced great academic difficulties upon entering high school were more likely to struggle throughout high

school (Fields, 2005). Bandura described the impact of self-efficacy on students and their belief that they are in control of their academic performance:

People with a low sense of self efficacy avoid difficult tasks. They have low aspirations and weak commitments to their goals. They turn inward on their self-doubts instead of thinking about how to perform successfully. When faced with difficult tasks, they dwell on obstacles, the consequences of failure, and their personal deficiencies. Failure makes them lose faith in themselves because they blame their own inadequacies. They slacken or give up in the face of difficulty, recover slowly from setbacks, and easily fall victim to stress and depression (Bandura, 1989, p. 5).

### **Legislation**

#### **Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965**

In 1965, the federal government authorized *Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*. This legislation creates equal educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status or income levels (United States Department of Education, 1965). The legislation provides the steps schools need to take in order to meet the needs of disadvantaged and low-achieving students in impoverished schools, including English language learners, students with disabilities and other at-risk students. The program's goals are to increase schools' accountability and improve students' academic performance while providing schools and faculty with the requisite funding, training, and resources to improve educational programs

Consequently, Title 1 schools have greater flexibility in determining the best way to serve their students. Community involvement is a critical component of the Title 1 school program as schools must work in conjunction with community agencies to provide

appropriate services to students and their families as well as give parents the opportunity to participate in their students' education (United States Department of Education, 2010).

In addition to earmarking funds for staff, resources, and training to schools in impoverished areas, the legislation provides funding and support to schools with "high numbers or high percentages of poor children to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards" (United States Department of Education, *Title I, Part A-Disadvantaged Children*, 2010, p.1). According to the United States Department of Education (2010), more than 56,000 schools in the United States used Title 1 funding to provide additional academic programs and support to 21,000,000 students during the 2009-10 school year. While the additional Title 1 funds are targeted to improve specific students' proficiency on standardized tests, schools with 40% or more of their students coming from low-income families may use these funds to operate school-wide programs (United States Department of Education, 2010).

Although references within the field of education to Title I, typically refer to *Title I, Part A-Disadvantaged Children*, the Title I legislation actually consists of six parts, A – G:

- *Part A-Disadvantaged Children* – discussed above.
- *Part B: Reading First and Even Start Family Literacy Programs* – promotes literacy skills in preschool and early elementary education programs.
- *Part C: Migrant Education Program* – supports migrant children's needs.
- *Part D: Neglected and Delinquent Children Programs* – provides funding to states for delinquent and neglected children, as well as encouraging greater cooperation between school and correctional facility officials.
- *Part F: The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program* – supports

research-based educational improvements for students and faculty members in struggling schools.

- *Part G: The Advanced Placement Incentive Program* – encourages the expansion of Advanced Placement programs so students have the opportunity to earn college credit while in high school. (United States Department of Education, 2010).

While Title I is the largest federally-funded program impacting elementary and secondary schools, research found its impact is positive and negative (Puma, 1993; Rothberg & Harvey, 1993). It is somewhat difficult to study the direct impact of Title 1 funding due as its provisions are broad and detailed; moreover, it is difficult to determine one particular reform's direct impact. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Title 1 funding helped minority students improve their mastery of basic skills by one-third (United States Department of Education, 1994). Conversely, Puma (1993) and Rothberg and Harvey (1993) found instances where Title I funding fell short of the program's goals. They reported that gains were infrequent and only had short-term benefits for students.

### **No Child Left Behind Act of 2001**

In an effort to increase school accountability and improve students' educational achievement, regardless of the schools' or students' income status, President Bush signed NCLB into law in January 2002. NCLB mandated that public schools have all students at or above grade level on standardized tests by the year 2014. The legislation uses high-stakes testing and other performance indicators to determine if schools make their AYP benchmarks. AYP is an aggregate measurement of a school's students and its subgroups, including students with disabilities, students with limited English proficiency, economically disadvantaged students, and students belonging to racial and ethnic

minority groups. In order to meet AYP, both the whole school and individual sub-groups within the school must meet the required academic standards.

In addition to academic achievement NCLB requires school districts to choose a second AYP indicator, which can include students' attendance rate or a school's graduation rate. Schools failing to reach their AYP benchmarks for three or more years are labeled as needs improvement. Schools classified in the Needs Improvement category must provide additional learning opportunities and instructional programs to students outside of school hours. NCLB refers to these required services as Supplemental Educational Services (No Child Left Behind, 2001).

Following its inception, NCLB required schools to include their students' on-time graduation rates as an AYP accountability component. Seastrom & Chapman (2006) defined on-time graduation as "the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years" (p.1). The inclusion of the graduation rate as an indicator of AYP required states and districts to keep accurate records of students' progression through school, school transfers, and graduation status to "ensure that the indicators described in those provisions are valid and reliable, and are consistent with relevant, nationally recognized professional and technical standards" (Seastrom & Chapman, 2006, p.1)

NCLB's Part H – Dropout Prevention of NCLB gives specific goals "to provide for school dropout prevention and reentry to raise academic achievement levels" (No Child Left Behind, 2001). This section of NCLB provides funding for dropout prevention programs and programs that encourage dropouts to complete their high school education. In 2002, the program's first year, Congress allotted \$125,000,000 and pledged to fund the program for the next five years (No Child Left Behind, 2001).

Irrespective of the funding, Congress gave states autonomy and authority to determine graduation rates, independent of each other. Consequently, uniformity in regard to how states calculate graduate rates is lacking, which is inconsistent with NCLB's provisions (Seastrom & Chapman, 2006; Swanson, 2003). In addition to determining their particular method for calculating graduation rates, states have the authority to determine how they determine AYP (Rumberger & Losen, 2005). Unlike its mandate that all students demonstrate academic proficiency, NCLB does not specify the criteria for determining AYP in regard to state's graduation rates. The State of Georgia set a yearly 10% rate of improvement benchmark and developed a tracking system to calculate the percentage of students graduating from high school four years after entering (Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

### **College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI)**

In response to meeting NCLB's increasing goals, schools districts and state educational agencies considered the feasibility of attaining the bill's goals. Researchers concluded schools would not meet NCLB's 2014 requirement, which requires that all students perform at or above grade level by 2014 (Weiss, Little, Bouffard, Deschenes, & Malone, 2009). In 2011, the Georgia Department of Education (GDOE) applied for a waiver from portions of NCLB. The GDOE proposed an alternative method for determining whether its schools make AYP: the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). To determine AYP, CCRPI combines three weighted factors: (a) state test scores and additional level specific factors to measure achievement for the given academic school year, (b) a comparison between a school's current and previous years test scores to determine progress, and (c) the lower 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of students' achievement gap closure when compared to school and state test score.

Similar to NCLB's calculations of AYP, measurements of progress vary based on school level. High school academic indicators include mastery, as measured by student performance on End of Course Tests in specific subjects, post high school readiness, and schools' graduation rate. Middle school academic indicators include content mastery, as measured by performance on the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Test, post middle school readiness factors, and predictors for high school graduation. Schools also receive a final efficiency rating, which involves comparing funds spent and students' achievement and surveying students and teachers. Schools' scores will be used to identify priority schools (lowest 5% performing schools), focus schools (lowest 10%), and reward schools (top 10%) (Georgia Department of Education, 2011).

### **At-Risk Students**

Of particular concern for educators, are students whose expected academic achievement level is below their current grade level. Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) described at-risk students as "outside of the mainstream mold, and who cannot meet the expectation of an academic set of standards" (p. 525). Slavin, Karweit, and Madden (1989) described at-risk students as those who are likely to experience school failure while Donnelly (1987) defined at-risk students as those who are unsuccessful and more likely to drop out of school. Along with poor academic performance and school behavioral issues, there are other factors that increase a student's likelihood of being labeled as at-risk. These additional predictive factors include minority status, low socioeconomic status, limited English proficiency, lack of parental education achievement, coming from a single-parent home, and a lack of motivation (Deschenes et al., 2001; Downing & Harrison, 1990; Miller, 2003).

While students are certainly active participants in the educational process, and as



a result have a degree of responsibility for their success, social factors impact students' ability to succeed in school. Van Acker and Wehby (2001) concluded that socioeconomic status, ethnic background, and family structure influence students' achievement and their ultimate success. As students strive to achieve higher educational standards, the aforementioned factors can impede their academic progress (Hock, Pulvers, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2001).

Although many factors influence a student's success in school, minority status is one of the hardest to overcome (Miller, 2003). The National Research Council (2002) found that alienation or isolation resulting from racial or cultural bias is one of the greatest risks minority students face. When comparing minority students' achievement scores to those of their Caucasian peers, minority students have lower scores (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006). Language discrepancies between home and school exacerbate a student's literacy struggles. Specifically, language barriers impact students learning, both in the home and at school, especially when the student and parents speak very little English as home-school communication is difficult (Miller, 2003). School cultures and student interactions often replicate those that exist in society at-large; therefore, minority students have higher rates of discipline referrals, special education placements, grade retention rates, and high school dropouts (Davis-Allen, 2009). Minority children who are able to successfully manage their education and meet high academic standards maintain strong personal ties with their schools, communities, and families (Miller, 2003).

### **Children of Poverty**

Children who live in areas with high concentrations of low-income families often enter preschool with weaker educational, communication, social, and behavioral skills than their peers who come from high-income families; unfortunately, these differences

result in students feeling they are a failure or inferior to their higher-skilled peers (Miller, 2003; Payne, 2003). A lack of early literacy exposure and interaction with adult role models contribute to the gap between students from high and low-income families (Duke, 2000). To address the gaps that exist between high and low-income students, Congress passed the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* that included a Title 1 provision. The Children's Defense Fund (2000) found that children living in areas with higher concentrations of poverty are more likely to perform poorly in school, receive inadequate after-school supervision, witness or experience violence, and have chronic health problems. In addition, low income neighborhoods, which are clustered in either inner city or rural areas, have higher rates of crime and substance abuse (Children's Defense Fund, 2000).

Compounding the problems associated with living in impoverished areas, is the common lack of after-school adult supervision. Lumsden (2003) found that nearly 15,000,000 children are latchkey kids, caring for themselves after school until their parents or other adults are available to supervise. Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) found that students who are not supervised during non-school hours are more likely to drop out of school, have higher absentee rates, engage in promiscuous behavior, and engage in criminal activities. Brooks-Gunn and Duncan also posited that a lack of parental supervision and involvement in the educational process can lead to feelings of estrangement, which further detracts from parental involvement in educational matters.

Given the academic expectations set forth in NCLB, at-risk students whose academic achievement is behind their grade-level peers are at a disadvantage as they must master additional material. These achievement gaps are a result of at-risk students being more likely to lose content knowledge during summer months out of school

(Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006). In an effort to bridge the achievement gap, schools provide afterschool academic support for at-risk students. After school programs, which target academically at-risk students, provide students with academic support in a safe, learning environment (National Research Council, 2002). In addition to academic support, after school programs give students a chance to pursue non-academic interests. Many programs also offer mentoring programs to interested students, allowing them to develop relationships with school and community leaders (Miller, 2003).

The Carnegie Corporation (1994) reported that disadvantaged students experience more learning losses during summer months; therefore, they benefit from summer educational opportunities. Initially, Title 1 was designed to provide additional learning time for such students who are at risk of academic failure. It is likely that many at-risk students need more time than their grade-level peers to learn material (Smith 2001).

### **Adolescence**

As children become adolescents and prepare for life beyond middle and high school, they experience changes. They undergo major physical and emotional changes as they navigate through the complexities of puberty. The onset of puberty brings about physical, emotional, mental, and psychological, all of which can have profound implications on academic performance (Eccles, 2004). During this time, many students are given more familial responsibilities. Concurrently, students are experiencing changes as they transition from elementary to middle to high school in a relatively short span of time. The transitions adolescents experience, both within the home and school environments, contribute to a greater amount of stress in their (Felner, Farber, & Primavera, 1983). Consequently, the normal struggles teens experience exacerbate the risk factors found in the school environment (Felner, Primavera, & Cauce, 1981).

The transitional years bring not only physical and familial changes, but also dramatic changes in cognitive ability. Erickson (1950) posited that as children develop, they go through stages marked by what he refers to as a psychological “crisis.” As children grow and develop according to their individual needs, the fixed order of these stages progress, and children should not be prematurely hurried from one stage to the next. The Industry vs. Inferiority stage usually occurs during the latter elementary school years as students develop self-confidence and as they learn to be industrious. The subsequent Identity vs. Role Confusion stage culminates during the teenage years as adolescents consider their future as adults and the contributions they will make to their community (Erikson, 1950).

Piaget (1963) also described childhood and adolescent development through progressive stages. The Propositional Operational phase, beginning at age 12, is the time when adolescents develop the following abilities: logical operations, propositional operations, logic, and implications. The development of these cognitive abilities varies, but they primarily occur between the ages of 12 and 15 as adolescents develop beyond the concrete operational stage of childhood into the formal operational stage of late adolescence and adulthood (Piaget, 1972).

As adolescent students transition from elementary to middle and middle to high school, they develop a unique set of characteristics. Thornburg (1981) found that as a group, adolescents are developing stronger peer relationships, and as these peer bonds strengthen, the importance they place on family lessens. These students are acutely aware of the physical changes they are experiencing due to puberty (Felner et al., 1983; Thornburg, 1981). Problem-solving skills develop and students begin to take an interest in learning what they deem to be relevant and meaningful information, and as a result,

they want some control over their learning process. Finally, these students begin to notice differing values in adults and hone their individual emerging value systems, as evidenced by their desire to question people in authority in regard to rules, traditions, and customs (Thornburg, 1981).

Consequently, the changes adolescents must navigate through can have a distinct impact on students' self-esteem and self-concept, with students often demonstrating effects of negative changes following school transitional periods (Harter, 1990). The impact of adolescent changes, both in and out of school, has a tremendous impact on all students, especially those considered as at-risk. "Twenty-five percent of all children in the United States aged 10-17 are at risk for curtailed emotional, educational, economic, and social opportunities due to their engagement in high-risk behaviors" (Akos & Galassi, 2004, p. 214).

The move from elementary school to middle school and later middle school to high school is full of changes for students. In addition to moving to a new physical building, most students are adjusting to new teachers, classes, and peers. Along with their concerns about adjusting to a new educational environment, eighth grade students worry about other issues, including the physical size of the new school, the work expectations in high school, and their ability to acquire the requisite time management and study skills to succeed, and the effect the transition will have on their self-image (Cushman, 2006; Mizelle & Irvin, 2005).

### **Ninth Grade**

Due to the academic struggles associated with freshman in high school, educational researchers have studied the transitional period from eighth to ninth grade and from middle school to high school. Gainey and Webb (1998) stated, "Ninth grade has

been identified as the most critical point to intervene and prevent students from losing motivation, failing, and dropping out of school” (p. 2). According to Hertzog and Morgan (1998), ninth grade students have higher failure rates and behavior problems that result in suspension or expulsion than the other high school grade levels.

With this in mind, a connection has been established between eighth grade behavior and ninth grade academic performance (McIntosh et al., 2008).

In response to the rising high school dropout rate, which was around 500,000 students in the year 2000, the academic performance of freshman is a concern (Holstrom, 2000). The dropout rate is significantly higher among students with disabilities.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, almost one-third of all 15-16 year-old students receiving special education services drop out of school each year (2002). Since the 1980s, the national graduation rate has declined; in 1991, 72% of students completed high school while in 2001 that number dropped to 67% (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). The Children’s Defense Fund estimated that one in seven students born in 2004 will not graduate from high school on time, either dropping out or taking longer than the typical four years to complete their diploma requirements (Children’s Defense Fund, 2004).

Retention in the ninth grade also poses a greater risk for students who continue to show poor academic performance as they are more likely not to graduate with their peers or drop out of school. Students who are retained, or who do not earn enough course credits to be promoted to sophomore status, are at a significantly higher risk for continued retention (lack of course credits) and eventually dropping out of school (Neild & Balfanz, 2001; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenburg, 2001; Roderick & Engles, 2001). Up to 40% of ninth graders who are retained do not graduate on time with their peers

(Fields, 2005).

The risks and problems associated with transition impact many aspects of students' academic experiences, both in the classroom and as they learn to function in a new school setting. Roderick (1994) found the following:

Students must cope with dramatic increases in the size of their school, the structure of academic schedules, and the complexity of the school environment. They are faced with changes in the size and composition of their peer group and a change in status from being the oldest to being the youngest age group in the school. The move to high school also involves an increase in academic demands as students are introduced to new analytic and conceptual skills (pp. 305-306).

### **School Organization**

Based on how they are structured, schools are bureaucracies as a result of their necessary organization, systems of hierarchy, and defined formal processes. While the term bureaucracy carries a negative connotation, it can actually have positive and negative characteristics for students depending on the structure and culture that accompanies it, especially from an administrative standpoint (Hoy, 2003). A clearly defined and understood structure can benefit or harm a school and that determination generally develops from how formalization and centralization occur (Sinden, Hoy, & Sweetland, 2004). Formalization refers to the acceptance of specific rules and procedures while centralization describes the decision making processes and who is involved in making decisions within the school or organization (Hoy, 2003; Sniden et al., 2004). Allowing students to become involved in the centralization and formalization of their school organization gives them a voice and a feeling of control or ownership. This type of student involvement allows students and teachers to build and strengthen relationships,

which improves students' attendance and reduces schools' dropout rates (Patterson, Beltyukova, Berman, & Francis, 2007).

When comparing the structure and organization of elementary, middle and high schools, each level is distinct. These schools serve students at different points in their cognitive development; therefore, the schools must respond accordingly to their respective student populations. Elementary schools tend to be task oriented while middle schools' goals are more focused on performance in preparation for high schools' emphasis on mastery of subject matter (Alspaugh, 2011). Along with organizational differences, there is a noteworthy shift in students' cognitive processing abilities as they progress from the later elementary grades through high school. Even in later elementary grades, students think in organized, ordered, and structured patterns; by middle school, these same students typically hone their deductive reasoning abilities, and in high school, students develop the requisite skills for abstract thought as they mature into adults (Thornburg, 1981).

In addition to developing cognitive abilities, early adolescents are developing new social skills and learning to interact with peers and teachers in new ways (Alspaugh, 2011). There is a shift in the student-teacher relationship from elementary to middle school. The elementary school classroom tends to be centered around small groups and individual attention from one teacher; in contrast middle schools rely more on whole-class instruction from several teachers (Alspaugh, 2011).

While the recent trend is for elementary school classrooms to be self-contained communities wherein one teacher is responsible for teaching all subject matter to the class, educational reforms have prompted a movement towards departmentalization in the upper-elementary school grades (Chan & Jarman, 2004). Elementary school curriculum



often devotes large blocks of time and resources to the study of literacy and mathematics as a way to prepare students for a more general education across several subject areas in later years; this practice has been in place for decades (Otto, 1947). Even though elementary schools continue to recognize the importance of developing foundational skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, they also recognize the value of utilizing instructional teams in upper-elementary grades so teachers can focus their efforts on specific subject matter and ease the burden of planning and preparation (Chan & Jarman, 2004). Although it is not part of the formal transitional process, the use of interdisciplinary teams and departmentalization in upper elementary grades can prepare students for team-centered middle schools.

Besides providing educational services to their students, middle schools serve students' specific needs. Beginning in the 1940s with the development of the junior high school and continuing through the middle school movement of the 1960s, specialized educational centers for young adolescents shared the goal of preparing students for entrance into high school (Bedard & Do, 2005). One of the early descriptions of the middle school model came from Batzel (1968), who advocated a gradual shift from two to three teacher teams in the sixth grade, with larger blocks of class time devoted to literacy and mathematics, to five teacher teams in the eighth grade, with equal time provided to the primary academic subjects.

Batzel (1968) theorized that the entire middle school process should be seen as a transitional program from elementary to high school based on the following premise: "A good middle school ought to provide for a gradual transition from the typical self-contained classroom to the highly departmentalized high school" (Batzel, 1968, p. 487). The paradigm shift from junior high schools serving students in the seventh through ninth

grades, to middle schools serving students in grades six through eight, did not occur without some growing pains. Some educators believed that ninth graders did not belong in a senior high school with sophomores, juniors, and senior. In fact, George and McEwin (1993) stated, “High school educators had actively opposed the middle school concept, labeling it as too permissive and less academically rigorous than the junior high school” (p. 3). The high school teachers who opposed the early middle school movement cited declines in student attendance rates, an increase in problematic behavior, and a loss of academic achievement as the reasons for the increase in the amount of students dropping out of school (George & McEwin, 1999).

There are several characteristics that define excellent middle schools: high academic standards, developmental responsiveness, and equitable educational outcomes for all students. In addition, excellent middle schools have teachers who hold subject-specific certification and provide high-quality instruction, respond appropriately to students’ needs, and are proactive in providing essential services and programs to ensure student success (Lipsitz & West, 2006). Early educational reformers, who promoted the middle school movement, believed the teacher-student relationship was paramount and great care should be taken to encourage positive relationships. Advocates called for a responsive school program that was flexible and specifically designed to meet the needs of a school’s unique student population (George & McEwin, 1999). Moreover, advocates wanted a middle that was neither an extension of the elementary school nor a mirror of the high school; instead, they wanted a unique educational setting specifically designed to provide young adolescent students with an opportunity to succeed as they progressed academically (Batzel, 1968).

The National Middle School Association strongly advocates for interdisciplinary

teams, consisting of specific subject area teachers who teach a smaller group of students. The association believes this approach enhances students' educational experiences, and they suggest that schools should respond to middle grade students' needs and encourage them to learn to think critically as they dissect new information (National Middle School Association, 2010). Fisher and Frey (2007) found evidence to support middle school characteristics as a means of easing the transition from elementary school. The authors stated that schools can employ smaller teams of two to three academic teachers and steadily increase the number of teachers on an academic team as students progress through the middle school grade levels. However, a school's enrollment can also influence its ability to conform to the ideal middle school model. Logistically, when a school's student population is large, it is difficult but not impossible to adhere to a middle school philosophy (Fisher & Frey, 2007).

Although high schools tend to be curriculum focused and highly departmentalized, with teachers certified in specific areas of expertise and knowledge, modern high schools are typically large educational institutions, with enrollment over 2,000 students. While research does not support high student populations, they are very common. Dissimilar to middle schools, high schools are organized into subject-based departments; thus, students may have classes with any combination of subject-area teachers. Students study core subjects such as literature, math, science, social science as well as language, fine arts, and other elective offerings (Darling-Hammond, Ross, & Milken, 2006). High schools offering a constrained curriculum reported fewer dropouts. A constrained curriculum describes the type and rigor of courses that are offered. A constrained curriculum challenges students and offers very few lower-level courses (Lee & Burkam, 2003).

## **Perspectives on Transition**

Blyth, Simmons, and Carlton-Ford (1983) offered two perspectives comparing the effect of transition on students' self-esteem, grade point average, and social behavior. The first perspective states that disruptions result from changing environments and "transition between schools (particularly the entry into junior high school) may be the closest American society comes to a formal rite of passage" (Blyth et al., 1983, p. 106). The second perspective, the "top dog" perspective, asserts that rapidly changing social status can be difficult and disruptive for students as the change from the highest social status in the school to the lowest in another school leads to a variety of disruptions and difficulties.

To a lesser extent, similar disruptions can occur during the elementary to middle school transition. These disruptions can be tempered somewhat if the new school is believed to be a more prestigious environment; yet, the disruption still exists "either because of the amount of discontinuity in the two school environments or because of a sharp change in statuses, we would expect the transition to a new school to be at least a short term disruption" (Byth et al., 1983, p. 106).

Roderick and Camburn (1999) studied urban high schools in Chicago and offered additional perspectives on school transition and the effect it has on students' success, specifically in urban school districts. Their intake perspective of transition, which is similar in nature to Bandura's theory of efficacy, stated that high schools in urban settings are set up so students will fail. In their Chicago study, the authors found that 40% of the freshman had failing grades in their first semester, and once they receive a failing grade, students are unlikely to recover from it. "Few students recover from grade failure, and early failure often translates in to poorer later performance" (Roderick & Camburn,

1999, p. 303). The second perspective Roderick and Camburn discussed (1999) discussed is the school effects perspective. This perspective expands on the fact that urban schools lack the requisite resources to support students during the transition process, which continues their cycle of failing courses and dropping out. “The finding that a high proportion of students fail major subjects in the early years of high school is symptomatic of an array of problems plaguing urban secondary schools including persistently high dropout rates and low student achievement” (Roderick & Camburn, 1999, p. 306).

To further illustrate the effects of school transition on students, Barber and Olsen (2004) followed almost 1000 students as they experienced multiple transitions from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school (5<sup>th</sup> grade through 10<sup>th</sup> grade). They discovered both transitions presented similar challenges to students, and students at both levels experienced loss or stress in similar areas, although the losses were greater following the middle school to high school transition than the elementary to middle school transition. In their research, the authors noted that one group of sixth grade students self-reported positive changes as opposed to the expected negative reports. This particular group of students participated in a school program that housed students on very small teams with fewer teachers and students. The structure was similar to a freshman academy approach many high schools utilize with their ninth grade students. The same group of students self-reported the expected negative changes the following year as they transitioned into a more traditional middle school setting (Barber & Olsen, 2004).

### **The Problem with Dropouts**

High school is a critically important time in a student’s educational career as they are either preparing for post-secondary educational options such as college or technical

school or for entering the workforce. Typically, students who do not complete high school earn less money during their lifetime and are at a greater risk for marital instability and incarceration (Henry, 2007). Moreover, students who do not successfully transition into high school are at a greater risk of dropping out of high school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). Smith (1997) discussed the detrimental results of dropping out of school and a proactive transitional program's ability to help students experience success upon entering high school and to reduce a school's dropout rate.

Of particular interest, is truancy's effect on a student's inability to complete high school, which has a negatively impacts an individual. There is a well-established and widening earning gap between high school dropouts and high school graduates. Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenburg (2009) stressed the negative impact non-completion of high school has on students' abilities and opportunities. In fact, "entrance into adult life without a high school diploma carries severe economic and occupational disadvantages" (Neild et al., 2009, p. 543). When comparing the high school graduates and dropouts' salaries, there is a noteworthy discrepancy:

In 1990, male high school graduates earned on average \$5,751 more than dropouts, while for women the figure was \$3,890. By the year 2001, those differences had risen to \$8,514 and \$6,147 respectively. In 11 years, the earnings gap had increased by 48% for men and by 58% for women" (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005, p. 30).

In addition to its negative impact on students' future earnings, non-completion of high school affects many aspects of a community. Nearly half of the national prison population is comprised of high school dropouts. When examining the characteristics of America's prison population, Barton (2006) found students with truancy problems were

likely to be incarcerated than students who attend school regularly. Barton underscored the importance of addressing the dropout problem: “The nation has proven it can focus on improving education achievement while students are in school. In this, (*sic*) there is a promise that it can also give such focused attention to keeping them in school until graduation” (Barton, 2006, p. 18).

While it is incumbent upon schools to provide the majority of transition preparation and support, Rumberger (1995) concluded familial support and stability are components of successful transition and adjustment programs for students. In fact, it is clear that “several family process factors—such as parental academic support, parental supervision, and parents educational expectations for their children—predicted dropout rates as other studies have shown they do with other measures of educational achievement” (Rumberger, 1995, p. 616). Although students whose parents had low educational expectations were five times more likely to drop out of school, Rumberger found that minority students have higher dropout rates. African American and Hispanic students have higher dropout rates than Caucasian students, while Asian students have a lower dropout rate than other ethnic groups.

Socioeconomic status also had an impact on dropout rates as just one standard deviation above the mean income correlated with a student being one-third less likely to drop out of school (Rumberger, 1995). In light of these findings, it is critical for schools to adapt to the changing needs of today’s students and encourage them to graduate. Public schools cannot control the demographics of their student population; however, they can address the specific needs of their student population and by doing so encourage students to remain engaged in their education:

Policies and practices have important implications for student dropout behavior.

Although schools cannot do anything about the demographic and social characteristics of their students, they can change their own practices that have a direct bearing on whether students remain in school (Rumberger, 1995, p. 618).

### **Early Warning Signs: Distress Signals of High School Dropouts**

Researchers from Johns Hopkins University and the Philadelphia Education Fund found that many students who later drop out of school frequently send distress signals prior to and during their middle school years (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Neild, Balfaz, & Hertzog, 2007). These so called distress signals include poor standardized test scores, behavior infractions, attendance, and demographic information (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Neild et al., 2007). Lee & Burkam (2003) cited the cumulative impact of academic and social factors that influence students to drop out of school. The authors asserted these factors exacerbate each other and increase dropout risk for affected students. Kirby (2007) explained how all of these factors create a cycle that contributes and perpetuates student disengagement. She concluded that in order for a student to succeed in school, the student must attend school; conversely, not attending school makes learning and completing assignments difficult. As such, absences create a sort of deficit for students, which can frequently leads to disengagement and then later impact the decision to drop out of school.

Similar to Kirby (2007), who stated that students must attend school to be successful, Alspaugh (2011) stated that it is beneficial for students to remain in the same school; in contrast, students who change schools at a non-traditional transitional point, also referred to as mobility, increase their risk of dropping out later in the educational process. Students experiencing multiple transitions—including a move from elementary school to middle school and middle school to high school—had lower academic



achievement than students who experienced a single move from a K-8 school to the high school, which is a sort of double jeopardy in the transitional process. Schools systems with two or more transitional points were found to have a higher number of dropouts than districts with only one transitional experience for its students (Alspaugh, 2011).

In addition to identifying multiple transitions as a risk factor, researchers found that sixth grade students' course grades, attendance, and behavior are risk factors for dropping out of school (Balfanz et al., 2007). Furthermore, students who have been retained or held back in middle school or high school were 11 times more likely to dropout when compared to their non-retained peers (Rumberger, 1995). Lee and Burkam (2003) found that both academic and social risk factors are cumulative, meaning they build upon each other.

**Academic achievement.** Studies supported the notion that students' academic achievement declines following a transition to middle school and during their subsequent transition to high school (Alspaugh, 2011; Baber & Olsen, 2004). The students' declining academic achievement and non-success in school results in students feeling alienated, which eventually leads to them dropping out of school (Catterall, 1998). While the loss in academic performance is noted following the transition from elementary school to middle school, it is much more pronounced following the transition from middle school to high school (Alspaugh, 1998).

When students were asked to identify their reason for dropping out of school, their most frequent response was poor academic performance (Jerald, 2006). Pallas (1987) identified poor academic achievement—as evidenced by failing grades, poor test scores, and retention—as the strongest predictor of students dropping out of school. Grade retention, which is typically the result of multiple course failures in elementary and

middle school or a failure to earn sufficient credits for promotion in high school, is the most accurate predictor of the academic variables, with almost 90% of high school dropouts having been retained at least once during their school career (Slavin & Madden, 1989). Students retained at least once were 50% more likely to drop out of school and a second retention increased the drop out risk to 90% for students (Slavin & Madden, 1989).

**Attendance.** Even though academic performance combined with grade retention is the strongest predictor of future dropouts, attendance is the second strongest predictor (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2007). At both the middle and high school level, students' attendance is a dropout predictor. In a study that investigated students' attendance and its impact on high school graduation rates, Allensworth and Easton (2007) found that freshmen who missed less than five days of school had an 87% graduation rate; conversely, freshman with more than 10 absences during their initial year in high school had a graduation rate of less than 50%. Students who dropped out of school had twice as many absences or more when compared to students were on track to graduate on time (Silver, Saunders, & Zarate, 2008). Attendance rates for sixth grade students are also a statistically significant predictor for students later deciding to drop out of school (Balfanz, 2007).

The predictor variables used to identify students at-risk for dropping out of school cannot be studied in isolation. Although truancy is identified as a problem in education (Goldstein, Little, & Akin-Little, 2003), it is logically deduced and established in research that poor attendance impacts students' achievement. (Roby, 2004). Students whose school attendance was 95% or higher were more than twice as likely to achieve passing scores on state-standardized tests (Murray, 2002). The Colorado Foundation for

Families and Children (1999) reported that students with the highest rates of absenteeism had poor grade performance and were more likely to drop out of school when compared to their peers who had better attendance.

In addition to truancy's negative impact on students' academic achievement and its potential to increase students' chances of dropping out, truancy causes other problems. Chronically truant students were more likely to be involved in substance abuse and gang-related activities (Johnson, 2008). Fritsch, Caeti, and Taylor (1999) found that enforcement of truancy laws is frequently a low-priority for law enforcement. However, when consistently enforced, truancy laws can reduce both gang violence and juvenile victimization (Fritsch et al, 1999). Heilbrunn (2007) agreed that truancy reduction programs can significantly decrease juvenile delinquency and criminal activity.

**Behavior.** In 2008, McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, and Cochrane's study compared students' discipline records and academic performance and found a strong statistical relationship between the two, which supports the idea that behavior can predict students' academic performance. Even though the authors concluded that behavior can predict students' academic achievement, the converse of this was not true as academic achievement cannot predict students' behavior. These findings underscore the fact that some students need behavior instruction. "If teachers are expected to provide successful academic instruction, it may be necessary to provide behavior instruction to lay the groundwork for effective teaching to take place without distraction" (McIntosh, et al., 2008, p. 252).

Theriot and Dupper (2009) found that problem behaviors and discipline referrals not only increase when students transition from middle school to high school, but they also increase when students transition from elementary school to middle school.

Following an educational transition, behavior referrals, often categorized as classroom disruptions, tend to be subjective in nature. This finding validates the theory that being in a new environment and learning new rules causes students to have behavior problems (Theriot & Dupper, 2009).

### **Factors Associated with Dropouts**

In addition to the previously discussed warning signs, there are many factors that increase the likelihood of a student dropping out. The factors strongly correlated with a student dropping out are as follows: demographics, family factors, previous educational experiences, and community characteristics (Balfanz, 2007; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

**Demographics.** Prior research found that African American and Hispanic students have a lower high school completion rate than Caucasian and Asian students (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Considering each ethnic group separately instead of the total school population as a whole, Smink and Schargel found the following annual dropout rates: (a) Hispanic students = 28%, (b) African-American students = 13%, and (c) Caucasian = 7%. The authors discovered that Hispanic students fell into multiple-risk for dropping out of school, including high rates of absenteeism, poverty, and teen pregnancy as well as an increased likelihood that they came from non-English speaking homes.

**Family Factors.** Smik and Schargel (2004) reported that children from impoverished backgrounds are three times more likely to drop out of school than children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Similarly, Kaufman, Ault, and Chapman (2001) compared dropout rates and family income levels. They concluded there is an inverse relationship between families' income levels and their dropout rates. Kaufman et al. found that families with the highest levels of income had the lowest dropout rate. In

addition to poverty, other family factors have negatively impacted students at-risk of failure or dropping out of school. Those family factors include living with a single parent, a parent or sibling who did not complete high school, stress in the home, and lack of parental support and involvement in the educational process (Jerald, 2006; Lamm, 2005).

Besides the family factors related to students' parents and socioeconomic status, students who become parents themselves are at a greater risk of dropping out of school. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy's 2002 report concluded that female students who give birth to a child prior to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday had a 41% dropout rate.. Additional research supported the finding that teenage parenthood increases the likelihood of dropping out of school (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Dynarski, 2002). The highest teen birthrate occurred among Hispanic teenagers, which could influence the elevated dropout rate among Hispanic females (Smink & Schagel, 2004). Becoming a parent not only increases the chance of a student dropping out of school, but it is also a predictive factor for their children. The children of teenage parents, regardless of their demographic characteristics, had higher grade retention and dropout rates when compared to their peers (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002).

Other family related factors affecting the high school dropout rate include employment and being a teenage parents. McNeal (1997) studied 20,000 students to determine how employment is related to the decision to drop out of school. He found that 59% of the students were employed or worked on a regular basis. As jobs became more labor intensive, such as farming or manufacturing, the likelihood of a student dropping out of school increased. Students cited many reasons for seeking employment, with increasing responsibility, gaining independence, and supporting themselves or their family as the most cited reasons. The perceived or actual need for financial gain impacts

the number of hours a student is willing to work, and research has found that students who work more than 20 hours each week were less likely to graduate from high school (McNeal, 1997; Pallas, 1984).

**Previous educational experiences.** Slavin and Madden (1989) found that 90% of high school dropouts have experienced grade retention at least once. They concluded there is a positive correlation between grade retention and high school dropout rates. Specifically, Slavin and Madden found that grade retention at least once during a student's academic career increased his or her chance of drop out risk by 50% while two grade retentions increased a students' drop out risk by 90%.

Apparently, if a student is retained later in his or her educational career, then the likelihood of the student dropping out increases. Students retained in elementary school were five times more likely drop out of high school, but when grade retention occurs in middle or high school, students were 11 times more than their peers to drop out of school (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). There is a link between a student's success in school and how much he or she enjoys the educational process (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). In contrast, students who do not value the educational experience have higher absentee rates, higher dropout rates, higher incidence of behavioral issues, and lower academic performance (Jerald, 2006; Jordon, Lara, McPartland, 1999).

**Community characteristics.** Geographical location is also predictive factor for determining the probability of a student dropping out of high school. For example, southern states have higher dropout rates when compared to the rest of the country (Greene & Winters, 2002). The lowest graduation rates were in Florida (60%), Georgia (63%) and Tennessee (63%). When comparing graduation rates in urban and suburban areas, urban areas have higher rates. For example, 52% of New York City's students

failed to graduate from high school, but that number was only 17% in a suburban area that is located within the same state. (Grey, 2008).

The Alliance for Excellent Education categorized close to 2000 schools with dropout rates over 50% as “dropout factories.” The majority of these schools, which were found in urban areas in the Northeast and in Southern states, had high minority populations and were located in poor areas; in addition, these schools had inexperienced and underpaid teachers (Pascopella, 2003). According to Balfanz & Letgers (2004), these schools had high minority populations, which were responsible for educating almost half of African American students, 40% of Hispanic students, and only 11% of Caucasian students in the country.

### **Characteristics of Transitional Programs**

The amount of high school students who are dropping out or failing to complete high school within a four year period is increasing. Many high schools have instituted practices such as Freshman Academies to ease the chaos that accompanies the transition from middle school to high school. While these programs can have positive results on students’ academic and behavioral performance, students need to be prepared for the academic and social challenges they will face as high school freshman (Chmelynski, 2004). Effective transition is not a one-sided, reactive approach confined to the high school.

Instead, according to Mizelle (2005), elementary and middle schools, particularly during transitional years, should proactively prepare their students to complete a smooth transition. In order for students to acclimate to their new school setting, schools should continue to implement the transition program. Schools that provide an integrated transition program for students, where both the sending and receiving school work

cooperatively throughout the process to prepare students to the coming changes, had a greater impact on students' achievement than schools with isolated programs (Mizelle, 2005).

MacIver (1990) also supported the notion that comprehensive transitional programs provide students with appropriate and accurate information, involve parents, provide social support, and encourage curricular collaboration between teachers at all levels. Smith (1997) found a correlation between students involved in comprehensive transitional programs, with personnel from both schools, and active parent involvement, and student achievement. The author determined that students who participate in these comprehensive programs have higher course credit rates and are more likely to remain on track for graduation during their freshman year.

With this in mind, middle schools can create proactive programs that facilitate eighth grade students' transition into ninth grade. Similarly, they can do the same for their incoming students who transition from the elementary school. Transitional programs can include school visits, student speakers, meetings with school counselors, and many other interventions. Smith (1997) found that students who attended schools with well-developed and established transitional programs were more academically successful than students who attended schools without comprehensive transitional programs.

A common component of schools' transitional programs is a school orientation, which provides students and their parents with pertinent information about the new school they will attend. This gives students the opportunity to meet teachers and administrators and become familiar with their new school setting. This informal meeting exposes students to the new school, which alleviates the stress that accompanies a school transition (Akos, 2004).



Not unlike the transition from elementary school to middle school, the transition from middle school can be an exciting, intimidating, and overwhelming time in an adolescent's life. Phelan et al. (1994) found that many students are very excited about some aspects of high school; yet, they are understandably apprehensive about other aspects of their new educational setting. The stress further compounds their already conflicting emotions. Most students relish the freedoms and socialization that comes with the high school experience; however, these same students worry about the amount of work they must complete, maintaining grades, and simply navigating an unfamiliar campus.

The social aspect of transitioning to a new school is also a significant factor in students' success during the transitional process. One high school in Oregon recognized the importance of a positive social climate on the educational environment and instituted a program that focused on creating a safe and caring school atmosphere (Kniesler, 2001). The primary focus was to eliminate the traditional poor treatment, or hazing, of freshmen by upper classmen. During the program's implementation phase, attendance rates increased while dropouts and expulsions decreased, a double benefit for the school. "With the elevation of behavior expectations came a corresponding increase focus on student achievement and the data collected for this time period indicates that these approaches worked" (Kniesler, 2001, p. 34).

### **Freshman Academies**

Many high schools are utilizing freshmen academies as a means of easing the transition from the team-focused middle school to the larger high school. Morrison and Letgers (1998) explained that freshman academies work as a "bridge that spans the rough waters of adolescence, enabling students to cross the threshold into high school and

continue on, better prepared academically and socially for the rigors of high school and post-secondary education” (p. 2). These academies typically house freshmen in separate areas of the school and frequently utilize a common team of teachers. Some freshman academies offer students specific elective courses that focus on study skills or serve as a school orientation course.

This school-within-a-school-approach provides a smaller educational setting in which students can acclimatize to their new school building (Chmelynski, 2003). Prior studies found this smaller and more intimate setting within the larger school has a positive impact on the following aspects of the education process: students’ academic achievement, behavior, attendance rates, dropout rates, attitude toward school, and extracurricular activity involvement; in addition, the smaller setting has a positive impact on teachers’ attitudes (Cotton, 1996; Patterson, et al., 2007; Thornburg, 1981).

Further research indicated that freshman academies ease students’ difficult transition from middle school to high school and advocated utilizing a small team of teachers in cohort-type settings in order to create an intimate learning environment for students. Homeroom teachers should serve as the primary contact person for students and parents while closely monitoring students’ progress and attendance (Felner, Ginter & Primavera, 1982). Patterson et al. (2007) supported the belief that smaller groups create a more comfortable transition as students are allowed to have a voice and build relationships during the transitional period.

Felner et al. (1982) also found that an academy or a school-within-a-school design is a viable program that positively impacts the transition process. Felner et al. investigated a program called PROJECT, which compared experimental and control groups’ academic achievement. The students in the control group participated in the

freshman academy experience, but the control group did not participate in the experience. The authors found the experimental group of students maintained their previous level of academic success during the transitional year, but the control group of students experienced sharp declines in their academic achievement. They advocated the creative use and structure of existing resources:

Low-cost changes in the roles of school personnel and the social ecology of the high school environment can effectively prevent academic and personal difficulties associated with school change by increasing the levels for social support available to students and decreasing the complexity of the setting being entered. (Felner et al., 1982, p. 288).

### **The Importance of Relationships**

Because high school students value having a voice and building relationships with peers and teachers, the smaller school setting increases their level of comfort during the transition process. In fact, interpersonal relationships are so important in educational settings that students cited negative interactions with peers or teachers as a deciding factor in their decision to drop out of school (Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997; Yazzi-Mintz, 2007). A smaller setting also alleviates some of the anxiety associated with a transition to a new and often much larger school. Paterson et al. (2007) stated that freshmen academies also provide the opportunity for students and teachers to foster positive relationships, which can improve students' attendance. The authors stated, "The power of possibility in positive relationships offer at least the promise of getting kids to show up and further the possibility of encouraging their membership in a community of learners" (p. 142).

Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson (2003) encouraged schools to focus on

building the components of school culture that increase student enthusiasm and participation, not in opposition to academic endeavors, but in combination with academic activities. Focusing on building positive relationships encourages students to become active stakeholders in the school culture. The building of relationships and inclusion of all students creates a positive educational environment for students while possibly addressing some of the common reasons students drop out of school (Lehr et al., 2003).

In addition to keeping students in school, Rumberger (2001) found when students engage in the school environment they perform better academically, attend school regularly, and are less likely to exhibit problem behaviors. Even though engagement can include scholarly interests and extracurricular activities, there is one common factor in all forms of student engagement: the relational component. Students value the relationships they build in school and consider them to be a foundational part of the educational experience (Yazzi-Mintz, 2007).

A survey of 324 students examined the relationship between students' dropout rates and their ability to develop friendships. Ellenbogen and Chamberland (2007) found that at-risk students had more opposite sex friendships, more friends who have dropped out of school, and fewer friends enrolled in their school than other students. Yazzi-Mintz (2007) administered the High School Survey of Student Engagement to over 80,000 high school students. The survey indicated that students' social interactions at school were a primary source of engagement, as 64% stated they attend school to interact with their friends. The second most popular reason for attending school, behind friendships, was graduating and pursuing post-secondary education opportunities.

The other foundational part of the successful educational experience occurs when students are confident that all stakeholders parents, teachers, administrators, counselors

commit to ensuring both a successful transition and consistent academic success. It is at this point that students are more likely to advocate for themselves or request assistance when they feel it is needed, generally at the onset of the problem when it is possible for them to recover academically without losing course credit (Pennington, 2006). A strong transitional team and transitional plan should advocate the attainment of the following goal: “To familiarize the incoming students with the operations of the high school both before they arrive and after they have begun ninth grade” (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, p. 96).

In addition to academic struggles, research found that alienation from peers and teachers has an influence on students’ decisions to leave high school (Catterall, 1998; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Rumberger, 1995). The relationships students form with teachers and other students have a tremendous impact on their decisions to drop out or stay in school, and student-teacher relationships are often predictive of early dropouts and potential academic success. Miller stated, “The climate between students and teachers does indeed have a strong and significant effect on predicting whether a student will fall-off track during his or her first year of high school.” (p. 14).

In an effort to further build familiar relationships between students and school staffs, many schools have assigned a specific administrator and counselors to transitional grade levels. This provides the school support staff with an opportunity to develop stronger relationships with their target population and students with consistency during the transitional period (Blankenstein, 2004; Camblin, 2003). Strong relationships are a critical component during the transition process as they greatly increase students’ chances of academic success. (Akos, 2004; Blankenstein, 2004).

## **Problems with Transition**

Alspaugh (1998) found that educational transitions from one school level to another lead to achievement losses, generally in the form of lower course grades and standardized test scores. This achievement loss exists following the transition from elementary to middle school and following the middle school to high school transition. When comparing the two transitions, students' achievement loss is greater when they transition from middle to high school (Alspaugh, 1998). In addition, students who experienced more frequent transitions were at greater risk for poor academic performance and potentially dropping out of school. In fact, Alspaugh (1998) found the following:

The students attending middle schools experienced a greater loss in the transition to high school than did the students making the transition from a K-8 elementary school. The experience of making a previous transition did not moderate the achievement loss during the transition to high school. This finding implies that the students were encountering a double-jeopardy situation (p. 5).

Furthermore, Alspaugh (1998) found a positive correlation between the number of school transitions students have and their dropout rate. By examining elementary students as they continued their academic careers through high school, Duchesne (1997) identified behavioral precursors that help identify potential dropouts. Duchesne (1997) asserted that students who exhibit external or internal problematic behaviors are at a greater risk of later dropping out of school.

Apparently, as students transition to high school, disturbing trends have developed: more ninth grade students are failing courses and dropping out of school than any other grade (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). The notion that students' academic performance drops in the ninth grade is not novel. Barone et al.

(1991) discovered that students' grades decline upon entering high school. Almost one-third of students who enter high school will drop out prior to completing their senior year or will not graduate in four years. Through legislation included in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), politicians and national leaders have attempted to address this growing problem. Part of this legislation monitors high schools' attendance and graduation. As a result of this legislation, many schools and districts are developing Truancy Reduction Programs (TRP) to identify at-risk students and encourage regular school attendance (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005).

Wheelock and Miao's (2005) findings further illustrate the academic difficulties ninth grade students are having in high schools across the country. Wheelock and Miao found the following: ninth grade enrollment was 13% higher than the previous eighth grade year's enrollment and 10<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment is 11-12% lower than the previous year's enrollment, which means that students must remain in the ninth grade if they do not earn enough credits to be promoted to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. In most cases, high school is the first time when student promotion to the next grade is predicated on a student completing a requisite number of courses as many middle and elementary schools often subscribe to the practice of social promotion to keep students with their age-group peers (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). The researchers noted the importance students place on relationships stating "ninth graders repeatedly report that they disengage from school when they feel teachers don't care about getting to know them as individuals," (Wheelock & Miao, 2005, p. 39).

### **Effects of Transitional Programs**

Smith (1997) noted that schools with strong transitional programs have much lower dropout rates and their students have higher academic grades than schools without strong transitional programs. Similar to what Smith described, Turner (2007) stated,

“Preparation of at-risk students, before they begin high school, can help them better adjust to the demands of a new environment” (p. 2). The key to helping students succeed in high school is to provide a comprehensive transition program that prepares them for the specific challenges they will face in their new school environments (Smith, 1997; Turner, 2007).

Hertzog and Morgan (1998) conducted a study on schools in southern Georgia and found that high schools with no transition programs or with incomplete transition programs had retention and failure rates as high as 40% for their incoming freshmen students. Conversely, they concluded that high schools with comprehensive transitional programs had lower dropout and retention rates. The following statement underscores the importance of transition programs: “Adults who fail to recognize the need to reduce the stress students associate with the transition to high school need only observe the transformation in students from the spring of their last middle level year to the fall of their entry year at the high school” (Herzog & Morgan, 1998, p 94).

Transition programs address students’ various needs and provide the highest level of support. MacIver (1990) concluded that effective transition programs have at least three basic components: information distribution, social support, and collaboration. On the most basic level, a transition program must provide students, parents, and teachers with appropriate and accurate information regarding the transitional process. This information can alleviate much of the stress associated with the transition. Secondly, it must provide social support to students who are apprehensive about entering a new environment with new peers and a changing social structure. Finally, there must be thoughtful collaboration between the teachers who are involved in the transitional process at both levels. Communication between eighth grade and ninth grade teachers provides a



higher level of support for the students prior to, during, and after the transitions take place (MacIver, 1990).

Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) also stressed the importance of schools and teachers communicating with each other. For example, high schools need to communicate expectations for students to the middle schools' teachers, and the middle schools and the high schools need to communicate with parents about the process. Cauley and Jovanovich identified the components of an effective transitional program "Successful transition programs depend on communication, cooperation, consensus, and commitment" (p. 21). The authors further stated the following:

Transition activities need to address the entire set of academic, developmental, social, and procedural concerns of students...because the transition to high school often disrupts social networks, schools need to include transition activities that help incoming students meet other and develop positive relationships." (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006, p. 18)

In regard to psychologically preparing students for transitioning to a new school, Turner (2007) asserted that school counselors can increase students' academic preparation, peer support, and parent and teacher involvement. By working with individual students and small groups of at-risk students, both prior to and following transition points, counselors and other school personnel can increase a student's chance of succeeding in high school.

Another important factor in the overall success of students during the transition phase from middle school to high school is the level of rigor and support that exist in the middle school (Oates, Flores & Weishew, 1998). When a student has an academically challenging middle school experience, he or she tends to have more academic success in

high school. Likewise, students who are given appropriate support and taught how to make good choices and be responsible for learning are also more successful in high school (Oates et al., 1998).

Turner (2007) also advocated for providing students with the opportunity to participate in cohort transitioning. Cohort transitioning involves keeping groups of students together during the transition process as opposed to having them spread out across many schools. With this in mind, the idea for ninth grade academies emerged, which are similar in structure to the team concept in the middle schools. Ninth grade academies allow students to spend their freshman year in a more structured and secluded environment within the school. True middle schools are already organized in such a manner, dividing students into academic teams or packs with a common group of teachers who monitor their progress closely throughout the year (Turner, 2007).

Cohort transitioning, or small group transitioning, not only provides students with a common group of teachers to interact with, but it also provides students with a consistent peer group, which can serve as a support system during the transitional process. Cohorts provide students the opportunity to build stronger relationships with both faculty and students. Erdley and Kingry (2007) found that positive peer relations eased transitional stress, even when peer groups changed as a part of transition.

Extracurricular activities and involvement in sports can also have a significant impact on whether or not a student considers dropping out of school. Catterall (1998) noted that students who are involved in either extracurricular activities or athletic programs at their school were more resilient than their peers and less likely to drop out of school.

While students who participate in extracurricular activities are more resilient,

students who have learned a variety of strategies for coping with stress are able to handle the transition into high school (Catterall, 1998; Elias, 2001). Academic and social problems are a primary source of stress for students, and coping strategies enable them to achieve a level of success during the transition period. Students with high emotional intelligence are more likely to use coping strategies as they learn to navigate their new educational setting (Elias, 2001). These coping strategies are extremely important as students experience a shift in social roles as they move from middle school to high school. These changing social roles and expectations are a major source of stress for students. Many schools found an increase in bullying and aggression as a struggle to establish peer dominance takes place following the transition from middle school to high school (Ellias, 2001).

Given the high level of stress that accompanies this transition (Phelan et al, 1994), it behooves educators to prepare students for the transition into new educational settings. Successful transition includes both academic and social support (Oates et al., 1998). Successful educational transitions are of considerable importance to the success of students. Perhaps the most troublesome transition is the transition into high school as “ninth grade is a make-it-or-break-it year” (Black, 2004, p. 42). A student’s freshman year in high school is a critical time. Yet, preparing for success in the ninth grade begins many years prior.

### **Conclusion**

Educators are responsible for ensuring the appropriate progression of students through their school careers. In order to provide funding for educational programs in areas with high levels of poverty, legislators enacted Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, which protects the learning process and provides funding. The

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 built upon the ideas of Title I legislation to increase accountability in the educational process. Both Title I and NCLB have specific provisions for at-risk students. In his theory of efficacy, Bandura (1989) underscored the importance of providing at-risk students with additional opportunities to succeed in their educational endeavors. The more success students experience in school, the more they are able to continue to succeed throughout their educational career.

The following factors determine if a student is at-risk for academic failure: (a) poor academic performance, (b) poor test scores, (c) minority status, (d) socioeconomic status, and (e) familial factors (Deschenes et al., 2001; Downing & Harrison, 1990; Miller, 2003). In regard to mastering curriculum content, at-risk students benefit from extended learning time, including after school programs that support daily curricular objectives and summer education programs (Carnegie Corporation, 1994; Miller, 2004).

Support for the importance of comprehensive transitional programming exists in a wide body of literature (Irvin & Mizelle, 2005; MacIver, 1990; Roderick, 1994). Comprehensive transitional program benefits students and schools throughout the transition process (Chmelynski, 2004). The specific type of transition programming is not as important as having a program in place that is focused and committed to preparing students as they transition from one school environment to the next (Alspaugh, 2011). These programs should occur both before and after the actual transition (Rumberger, 1995).

Prior to transition points, programs should focus on preparing students to succeed in their new school (Blankstein, 2004; Mizelle, 2005) as well as identifying students with potential risk factors such as poor academic performance, truancy, and behavior infractions (Kirby, 2007; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Neild et al., 2007; Rumberger, 1995).

Following the transition, the receiving school should develop programs that support students as they adjust to their new school (Kniesler, 2001; Mizelle, 2005). The development of programs that bridge the gap between the two schools and ease the burden of transition students experience could be an invaluable resource for students and teachers (Smith, 1997).

While there is a body of literature addressing the wide range of problems associated with school transition, there is a lack of literature that deals directly with summer transitional programs and what structure and components are most effective for assisting students as they transition from one grade level or school to another. The design of summer transitional programs is often left to the discretion of the teachers or administrators who coordinate the program. Without specific guidelines, program execution can vary widely based on the goals and philosophies of the educators leading them.

The review of literature presented in this chapter provided the background for the development of this study. This study sought to determine if participation in a summer school transition program had any impact on students' grades, attendance, or behavior. The student participants in this study were selected because their teachers felt they could benefit from a summer school transition program. The third chapter of this dissertation will describe the methods employed in the data analysis, the process used to select participants, the data collection methods used, and the data analysis utilized in this study.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

This causal-comparative study sought to determine the impact that grade level and attending a summer transition program had on students' attendance, behavior referrals, and course failures. The impact of the summer transition program was measured by changes in the mean in school attendance, number of behavioral referrals, and number of course failures between students entering the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades before and after the treatment group attended a summer school transition program. The study also analyzed student data based on grade level to determine if any difference existed in the dependent variables: school attendance, number of behavioral referrals, and number of course failures between the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students, regardless of their participation in the summer school transition program.

### **Research Design**

This quantitative study utilized a causal-comparative research design. This study's dependent variables were measured numerically and analyzed in regard to this study's research questions (Ary, et al., 2006). As this study examined pre-existing student data to determine if the student grade level or participation in a summer transition program had an impact on students' grades, attendance, and behavior, a causal-comparative study is the most appropriate (Ary et al., 2006).

Horton's 2010 causal-comparative study examined the effect of an afterschool, academic intervention program's effect on middle school at-risk students CRCT scores and behavior. Students who were identified as at-risk were invited to attend the program. The choice to attend or not attend was at the discretion of the students and their families. Horton's study compared students' CRCT math and reading scores and number of

behavioral office referrals prior to and following their participation in the afterschool program. Because Horton did not have both an experimental and a control group, she compared student data using a two-tailed paired t-test to identify changes from one year to the next (Horton, 2010).

Similar to this study's sample, Horton (2010) also utilized a convenience sample. School teachers and administrators selected participants. However, in conjunction with their families, the students self-selected their membership in either the treatment or control group based on their decision to attend or to not attend summer transitional program. Horton's study had only one group whereas this study had both a treatment and a control group, for comparison purposes. The self-selection of group membership during the formation process for the groups prevented any randomization of group assignments.

Ary et al. (2006) discussed the need for a comparison group when the treatment group cannot be randomized. The lack of randomization resulting from the self-determined assignment of students to the treatment group necessitates the use of a control group. By not attending the summer transition program, the students in this study's control group also self-determined their group assignment. Based on the fact that this study did not investigate the relationship among variables, and it investigated multiple variables for multiple groups as opposed to a single group, this study did not use a correlational design (Ary et al., 2006).

This study used a pre-treatment versus post-treatment comparison of both the treatment and the control groups to allow the researcher to account for some external factors that would affect all students throughout the school year following the summer school transition program. By comparing the treatment and control groups from the same grade level pool of students, the researcher sought to control for other circumstances that

could have had an impact on the dependent variables. Both groups had the same of very similar experiences during the post-treatment school year in terms of school climate, teachers, and special events.

### **Research Questions and Null Hypotheses**

The following research questions guided this research study and the corresponding null hypotheses:

**Research Question 1.** How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' attendance when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?

*Null hypothesis 1.* There will be no difference in the students' attendance before and after they attended the summer school transitional program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.

Research Question 1 compared the change in students' attendance from the year prior to the summer transition program to the year following the summer transition program. Changes in attendance for students who participated in the summer transition program and those who were invited but did not attend the summer transition program were compared.

**Research question 2.** How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' grades when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?

*Null hypothesis 2.* There will be no difference in the number of course failures of students before and after attending the summer school transitional program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.

Research question 2 compared the change in students' grades as measured by the



number of courses a student failed from the year prior to the summer transition program and the year following the summer transition program. Changes in course failures for students who participated in the summer transition program and those who were invited but did not attend the summer transition program were compared.

**Research question 3.** How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' behavior when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?

*Null hypothesis 3.* There will be no difference in the number of behavior referrals for students before and after they attended the summer school transition program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.

Research question 3 compared the change in students' behavior as measured by the number of office referrals from the year prior to the summer transition program to the year following the summer transition program. Changes in behavior for students who participated in the summer transition program and those who were invited but did not attend the summer transition program were compared.

**Research question 4.** How did students' grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) impact students' attendance?

*Null hypothesis 4.* There will be no difference in students' attendance based on grade level.

Research question 4 compared the change in students' attendance based on grade level for the year prior to and the year following the summer transition program for all students, regardless of their participation in the summer transition program.

**Research question 5.** How did students' grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) impact students' grades?

***Null hypothesis 5.*** There will be no difference in the number of course failures of students based on grade level.

Research question 5 compared the change in students' grades as measured by their course failures and based on grade level for the year prior to and the year following the summer transition program for all students, regardless of their participation in the summer transition program.

**Research question 6.** How did students' grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) impact students' behavior?

***Null hypothesis 6.*** There will be no difference in the number of behavior referrals for students based on grade level.

Research question 6 compared the change in students' behavior as measured by number of office referrals and based on grade level for the year prior to and the year following the summer transition program for all students, regardless of their participation in the summer transition program.

### **Variables**

This study sought to compare changes in students' attendance, grades, and behavior from the year prior to and the year after participating in a summer school transition program to determine if participation in the program had any impact on these variables; this study also compared student data based on grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth). The summer school transitional program was a three-week summer program designed to assist students as they prepared for the educational transition from one grade to the next. The program served students in one of the following educational transitions: from sixth grade in an elementary school to seventh grade in a middle school, from seventh to eighth grade within the same middle school, and from eighth grade in a middle

school to ninth grade in a high school. Students received daily instruction in mathematics, reading and language arts, and science. Students were assigned to classes taught by teachers from the grade level they were about to enter; for example, seventh grade teachers taught rising seventh grade students. Given the directive to preview upcoming curriculum material, teachers determined the course of study for the summer transitional program.

This research study's independent variables were participation in the summer transition program (yes v. no) and the students' grade level (seventh v. eighth v. ninth). The dependent variables consisting of students' attendance, grades, and behavior, are identified below in conjunction with the corresponding research question:

**Research Question 1.** *How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' attendance when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?* This research question necessitated using students' attendance as a dependent variable. For the purpose of this study, the researcher measured students' attendance based on the number of days a student is absent from school during the course of the school year.

**Research question 2.** *How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' grades when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?* This research question necessitated using students' grades as a dependent variable. For the purpose of this study, the researcher examined the number of courses a student failed.

**Research question 3.** *How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' behavior when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?* This research question necessitated using students' behavior records as a

dependent variable. For the purpose of this study the researcher analyzed the number of teacher or administrator generated behavioral office referrals.

**Research question 4.** *How did the students' grade level (seventh v. eighth v. ninth) impact students' attendance?* This research question necessitated using the students' attendance as a dependent variable. For the purpose of this study the researcher measured students attendance based on the number of days a student was absent from school.

**Research question 5.** *How did the students' grade level (seventh v. eighth v. ninth) impact the students' grades?* This research question necessitated using students' grades as a dependent variable. For the purpose of this study, the researcher examined the number of courses students' failed.

**Research question 6.** *How did the students' grade level (seventh v. eighth v. ninth) impact students' behavior?* This research question necessitated the use of students' behavior records as a dependent variable. For the purpose of this study, the researcher analyzed the number of teacher or administrator generated behavioral office referrals.

### **Setting, Sample, and Participants**

#### **Setting**

This study took place in a suburban school district in northwest Georgia. This study collected student data from the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years. During these school years, participants were enrolled in one of the following three grade levels: (a) sixth grade in one of three elementary schools followed by seventh grade in the middle school, (b) seventh grade in the middle school followed by eighth grade in the same middle school, or (c) eighth grade in the middle school followed by ninth grade in the high school.

The schools involved in this study are as follows:

**Elementary School 1.** Elementary School 1 is a Title I elementary school serving students in kindergarten through sixth grade. At the time of this study, there were 860 students enrolled in the school, 86% of whom receive free or reduced-price lunch. The school has 71 full-time certified personnel on staff, including teachers, administrators, an academic coach, a media specialist, and a counselor.

**Elementary School 2.** Elementary School 2 is a Title I elementary school with approximately 750 students enrolled in pre-K through sixth grade, 77% of whom receive free or reduced-price lunch. The school has 71 full time certified personnel on staff.

**Elementary School 3.** Elementary School 3 is a Title I elementary school with approximately 620 students enrolled in pre-K through sixth grade, 52% of whom received free and reduced priced lunches during the 2010-11 school year. The school has 74 certified personnel on staff.

**Middle School.** The middle school in this study is a Title I middle school serving 750 seventh and eighth graders in suburban northwest Georgia. Within each grade level, students are placed on interdisciplinary teams of either four or five teachers. The school conducts five academic classes each day: language arts, reading, mathematics, social studies, and science. Students also attend rotating connections classes such as PE, business, or art. More than half of the school population, 54%, qualified for the free and reduced lunch program; all 401 of these students are classified as economically disadvantaged. The middle school was the primary setting for this research project. All of the students who participated in this study were enrolled in the middle school for at least one of the two years of this study. In addition, the middle school housed, organized, and administrated the summer transition program.

**High School.** The high school in this study serves approximately 2000 students in grades nine through twelve. At the time of this study, the school was not designated as a Title 1 school. First time ninth grade students participate in a ninth grade academy. The ninth grade academy provides first-time freshmen with a smaller school environment, stronger teacher support, and mandatory tutoring for students who are failing or in danger of failing a course. Sophomores, juniors, and seniors take six, 55 minute classes. Students enrolled in ninth grade academy take six classes: five academic courses and one elective. Each school year, all students should earn six academic credits to apply toward graduation.

### **Sample**

The students who participated in this study were recommended to participate in a summer school transition program. The students' teachers or school administrators recommended the students for participation in the summer transition program. In order to attend the summer school programs, students had to be academically eligible for promotion to the next grade level (students not who were not eligible for promotion to the subsequent grade were required to attend a school district mandated summer school program to recover course credit), and they had to earn passing scores on the Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Test (GCRCT). The teachers believed the students would benefit from participating in the program. The program focused on at-risk students and students enrolled in remedial education program classes. Initially, there were 121 students targeted for participation in the summer transition program: 37 rising seventh graders, 44 rising eighth graders, and 40 rising ninth graders.

## **Participants**

Of the 123 students who were targeted for program, 83 students participated in the summer transitional program. For the purpose of this study, the control group was comprised of students who were invited but did not attend. The treatment group was comprised of students who attended the summer transition program. There were 29 rising seventh graders, 31 rising eighth graders, and 23 rising ninth graders who participated in the summer transition program. Of the 40 students who were invited but did not attend, 11 of them were rising seventh graders, 12 were rising eighth graders, and 17 were rising ninth graders. The free program lasted 14 days. The academic portion of the program placed students in three classes each day: math, reading and language arts, and science. Certified teachers taught the classes, with small group settings ranging from eight to twelve students in each group. Students were provided transportation to and from the school building as well as breakfast and lunch while they were at school. At the conclusion of school year following the summer school transition program, 92 of the 123 targeted students attended the participating schools, providing access to their data. Of these 92 students, 59 were in the treatment group of program participants and 33 were in the control group.

## **Justification for Sample**

This study employed a convenience sample of student participants. Due to the fact that the summer school transition program served a distinct group of students, the researcher was unable to use a random sample to conduct a statistical comparison of all student participants. Ultimately, this study sought to determine if the summer transition program or students' grade level had any impact for students who attended a summer school transition program. Therefore, the researcher determined a comparison of students

who attended the summer school transition program and students who were invited but did not attend provided an accurate reflection of the target population.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Upon receiving approval from the University Institutional Review Board and the target school district central office personnel, the researcher met with the principals of the schools that were included in this study. The researcher described the nature and purpose of this study and explained the rationale for the data that were needed. The researcher provided the principals with a blank Excel spreadsheet in which to record the data. There were two spreadsheet pages for the student data, one for students who participated in the summer transition program and a second for students who were invited but did not attend the summer transition program. Each page of the spreadsheet had columns to designate each student's grade level, number of absences, number of course failures, and number of office referrals the student received. Each principal designated a faculty member to collect and record the de-identified student data. After each school principal provided the researcher with the requisite data, the researcher merged the data into one document. The researcher stored the spreadsheet on a password-protected computer that was only accessible to the researcher.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

For the purpose of this research study, a chi-square analysis is the most appropriate statistical test to determine if any significant differences exist across the distribution of nominal variables (Tuckman, 1999). In order to determine if there was a link between participation in the summer school transition program and students' grade level and this study's dependent variables (grades, attendance, and behavior), the researcher used a chi-square analysis. Using the statistical software SPSS, the researcher



analyzed the data as a whole to determine the effects of the summer transition program and the students' grade level (this study's independent variables) on students' grade attendance, behavior, and course failures. Two chi-square analyses addressed each research question, one for change and one for trend (increase, no change, decrease) in the dependent variables. Finally, each research question was addressed using data from the statistical results.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Under the direction of the IRB, great care was taken to protect the identity of students participating in this study. The primary ethical consideration for this study was protecting the identities of this study's participants, for both the treatment and control groups. Because there was no interaction between the researcher and this study's participants, other ethical considerations were minimal. Prior to the researcher gathering the data, school district officials, who compiled the data, removed all students' names and identifying information. The researcher assigned a number to each student in order to look for any correlations among specific students and track students' data.

### **Summary of Methodology**

The researcher used a causal-comparative research design to determine the impact of grade level and participation in a summer transition program on students' attendance, grades, and behavior. The students participating in this study had been identified for participation by their teachers, who believed they could benefit from attending the summer transition program. The chi-square analysis provided the requisite information to determine if change existed in this study's dependent variables before and after participating in the summer transition program and based on students' grade level. This study contained three dependent variables: students' attendance (number of days absent),

grades (number of course failures), and behavior (number of office referrals). These dependent variables were tested based on independent variables: student grade level (seventh v. eighth v. ninth) and participation in the summer transition program (yes v. no). The researcher compared data from the year prior to the treatment group's participation in the summer school transition program and the year following the treatment group's participation in the summer school transition program. This study sought to identify significant changes in any of the dependent variables, and not a relationship between the variables. The researcher collected nominal data and included the following: attendance counts, course failures; therefore, a chi-square analysis was the most appropriate statistical test to determine if any significant differences existed in the variables based on summer school transition program participation and grade level (Tuckman, 1999). Chapter 4 of this dissertation provides the results of this study's data analysis.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

One hundred twenty-one students were invited to participate in the summer school transition program following the 2009-2010 school year. This study compared two groups' grades, attendance, and behavior: students who attended a summer school transition program and students who did not attend this program. At the time data were collected, 92 of the initial 121 students were still enrolled in the participating schools, which enabled the researcher to collect data for 92 participants.

### Descriptive Statistics

This study utilized 92 rising, seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students. Twenty-five (27.2%) of the students were seventh graders, 37 (40.2%) were eighth graders, and 30 (32.6%) were ninth graders. Sixty-two (67.4%) students attended the program while 30 (32.6%) did not attend. Frequencies and percentages for the number of students based on grade level (seventh, eighth, and ninth) and intervention attendance (did attend vs. did not attend) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Frequencies and Percentages for Number of Students by Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Intervention Attendance (Did Attend vs. Did Not Attend)*

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Grade level		
7 <sup>th</sup>	25	27.2
8 <sup>th</sup>	37	40.2
9 <sup>th</sup>	30	32.6
Intervention attendance		

Did not attend	30	32.6
Did attend	62	67.4

The range of seventh grade absences changed from 0.00 to 12.00 ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 2.97$ ) prior to the intervention to 0.00 to 19.00 ( $M = 6.00$ ,  $SD = 4.57$ ) after the intervention. The range of seventh grade failures changed from 0.00 to 5.00 ( $M = 0.80$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ) prior to the intervention to 0.00 to 5.00 ( $M = 0.68$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) after the intervention. The range of seventh grade referrals changed from 0.00 to 8.00 ( $M = 2.04$ ,  $SD = 2.57$ ) prior to the intervention to 0.00 to 6.00 ( $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ) after the intervention.

The range of eighth grade absences changed from 1.00 to 19.00 ( $M = 7.57$ ,  $SD = 4.90$ ) prior to the intervention to 1.00 to 31.00 ( $M = 9.51$ ,  $SD = 7.22$ ) after the intervention. The range of eighth grade failures changed from 0.00 to 4.00 ( $M = 0.65$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) prior to the intervention to 0.00 to 2.00 ( $M = 0.47$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) after the intervention. The range of eighth grade referrals changed from 0.00 to 19.00 ( $M = 1.49$ ,  $SD = 3.49$ ) prior to the intervention to 0.00 to 15.00 ( $M = 1.97$ ,  $SD = 3.25$ ) after the intervention.

The range of ninth grade absences changed from 0.00 to 26.00 ( $M = 7.57$ ,  $SD = 5.62$ ) prior to the intervention to 0.00 to 22.00 ( $M = 6.00$ ,  $SD = 5.38$ ) after the intervention. The range of ninth grade failures changed from 0.00 to 3.00 ( $M = 0.50$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) prior to the intervention to 0.00 to 3.00 ( $M = 0.80$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) after the intervention. The range of ninth grade referrals changed from 0.00 to 4.00 ( $M = 1.17$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) prior to the intervention to 0.00 to 17.00 ( $M = 2.40$ ,  $SD = 4.01$ ) after the

intervention. Means and standard deviations for absences, failures, and referrals by grade level, prior to and after the intervention, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Means and Standard Deviations for Absences, Failures, and Referrals Prior to and After the Intervention*

Variables	Seventh		Eighth		Ninth	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Prior						
Absences	4.20	2.97	7.57	4.90	7.57	5.62
Failures	0.80	1.44	0.65	0.98	0.50	0.82
Referrals	2.04	2.57	1.49	3.49	1.17	1.21
After						
Absences	6.00	4.57	9.51	7.22	6.00	5.38
Failures	0.68	1.31	0.47	0.74	0.80	1.02
Referrals	1.6	2.06	1.97	3.25	2.40	4.01

Among grade levels, 28 (75.7%) eighth graders attended the intervention, followed by 18 (72.0%) seventh graders. Among grade levels, 14 (46.7%) ninth graders did not attend the intervention, followed by nine (24.3%) eighth graders. Frequencies and percentages for intervention attendance (did not attend vs. did attend) based on grade level (seventh, eighth, and ninth) are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Frequencies and Percentages for Intervention Attendance (Did vs. Did Not) by Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth)*

Grade	Did not attend		Did attend	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
7 <sup>th</sup>	7	28.0	18	72.0
8 <sup>th</sup>	9	24.3	28	75.7
9 <sup>th</sup>	14	46.7	16	53.3

Of the seventh graders, 15 (60.0%) participants showed an increase in absences. Thirteen (52.0%) demonstrated no change in course failures. For referrals, 10 (40%) students numbers decreased and 10 (40.0%) students showed no change. In regard to the eighth graders, 24 (64.9%) students showed an increase in absences, 18 (48.6%) showed no change in the number of course failures, and 19 (51.4%) showed no change in the number of referrals. Of the ninth graders, 17 (56.7%) students showed a decrease in absences, 13 (43.3%) showed no change in course failures, and 12 (40.0%) showed an increase in failures. Frequencies and percentages for the trend (decreased, no change, and increased) in absences, failures, and referrals based on grade level (seventh, eighth, and ninth) are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

*Frequencies and Percentages for the Trend (Decreased vs. No Change vs. Increased) in Absences, Failures, and Referrals by Grade Level*

Grade	Absences		Failures		Referral	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Seventh</b>						
Decreased	5	20.0	6	24.0	10	40.0
No change	5	20.0	13	52.0	10	40.0
Increased	15	60.0	6	24.0	5	20.0
<b>Eighth</b>						
Decreased	10	27.0	11	29.7	8	21.6
No change	3	8.1	18	48.6	19	51.4
Increased	24	64.9	8	21.6	10	27.0
<b>Ninth</b>						
Decreased	17	56.7	9	30.0	8	26.7
No change	3	10.0	13	43.3	10	33.3
Increased	10	33.3	8	26.7	12	40.0

## Findings

### Research Question 1

How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' attendance when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There will be no difference in the attendance of prior to and after they attended the summer school transitional program (intervention) when compared to

students who were invited but did not attend.

To assess Research Question 1, the researcher conducted two chi-square analyses (tests-of-independence) to determine if a statistically significant difference existed between students' absences based on intervention attendance (did not attend vs. did attend). For Research Question 1, the first chi-square was conducted between the number of absences and intervention attendance. Because the degrees of freedom were high for the first chi-square analysis (20), the researcher conducted a second chi-square analysis. For the second analysis, the researcher recoded the absence data in order to indicate a decrease in absences, no change in absences, or an increase in absences. Using the recoded data, the researcher determined the degrees of freedom for the second chi-square analysis (2) were more appropriate for the sample size.

To be certain the assumption of expected cell values was met, the researcher analyzed the 21 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance and absences. In order to meet the assumption, no more than 20% of the cells can have expected values of less than five and no cells can have values of zero. Thirty-eight (90.5%) cells had expected values less than five and 11 cells have values of zero, violating the assumption. The 21 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance and absence change was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 (20) = 34.59, p = .022$ ), suggesting that a statistically significant difference existed between intervention attendance and number of absences. Therefore, the researcher rejected  $H_{01}$ : There will be no difference in the attendance of students before and after they attended the summer school transitional program (intervention) when compared to students who were invited but did not attend. The results of the 21 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance (did attend vs. did not attend) and absence change are presented in Table 5.



Table 5

*Chi-Square (Test-of-Independence) on Intervention Attendance (Did Not Attend vs. Did Attend) and Absence Change*

Absence change	Attendance		$\chi^2$ (20)	<i>p</i>
	Did not attend	Attended		
-13.00	1 [0.3]	0 [0.7]	34.59	.022
-10.00	1 [0.3]	0 [0.7]		
-9.00	1 [0.3]	0 [0.7]		
-6.00	1 [0.3]	0 [0.7]		
-5.00	3 [2.0]	3 [4.0]		
-4.00	4 [2.0]	2 [4.0]		
-3.00	2 [2.0]	4 [4.0]		
-2.00	1 [2.0]	5 [4.0]		
-1.00	2 [1.3]	2 [2.7]		
0.00	1 [3.6]	10 [7.4]		
1.00	1 [2.9]	8 [6.1]		
2.00	2 [3.6]	9 [7.4]		
3.00	3 [3.6]	8 [7.4]		
4.00	0 [1.6]	5 [3.4]		
5.00	2 [0.7]	0 [1.3]		
6.00	2 [1.3]	2 [2.7]		
7.00	0 [0.7]	2 [1.3]		
8.00	1 [0.3]	0 [0.7]		

9.00	0 [0.3]	1 [0.7]
10.00	2 [0.7]	0 [1.3]
27.00	0 [0.3]	1 [0.7]

*Note.* Numbers in brackets represent expected values of the chi-square.

To be certain the assumption of expected cell values was met, the researcher analyzed the 3 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance (did attend vs. did not attend) and absence trend (decreased vs. no change vs. increased). One (16.7%) cell had an expected value less than five and no cells had values of zero, meeting the assumption. The 3 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance and absence trend was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 (2) = 8.00, p = .018$ ) suggesting that a statistically significant relationship existed between intervention attendance and absence trend. Interestingly, the researcher found that students who did not attend the intervention had fewer absences. Therefore, the researcher rejects  $H_{01}$ : there will be no difference in the attendance of students before and after they attended the summer school transitional program (intervention) when compared to students who were invited but did not attend. The results of the 3 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance (did attend vs. did not attend) and absence trend (decreased vs. no change vs. increased) are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

*Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Intervention Attendance (Did Not Attend vs. Did Attend) and Absence Trend*

Absence trend	Attendance		$\chi^2 (2)$	<i>p</i>
	Did not attend	Attended		

Decreased	16 [10.4]	16 [21.6]	8.00	.018
No change	1 [3.6]	10 [7.4]		
Increased	13 [16.0]	36 [33.0]		

*Note.* Numbers in brackets represent expected values of the chi-square.

## **Research Question 2**

How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' grades, when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?

**H<sub>02</sub>:** There will be no difference in the number of course failures of students before and after they attended the summer school transitional program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.

To assess Research Question 2, the researcher conducted two chi-square analyses to determine if a statistically significant difference existed between students' failures based on intervention attendance (did not attend vs. did attend). For Research Question 2, the first chi-square was conducted between the number of failures and intervention attendance. Because the degrees of freedom were high for the first chi-square analysis (10), the researcher conducted a second chi-square analysis. For the second analysis, the researcher recoded failure data to indicate a decrease in failures, no change in failure, or an increase in failures. With the recoded data, the degrees of freedom for the second chi-square analysis (2) were more appropriate for the sample size.

To be certain the assumption of expected cell values was met, the researcher analyzed the 11 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance and failure change. Eighteen (81.8%) cells had expected values less than five and six cells had values of zero, violating the assumption. Results should be interpreted with caution. The 11 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance and failures change was not statistically

significant ( $\chi^2 (10) = 11.04, p = .355$ ) suggesting that there was not a statistically significant relationship between intervention attendance and failure change. Therefore, the researcher did not reject  $H_{02}$ : There will be no difference in the number of course failures of students before and after attending the summer school transitional program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend. The results of the 11 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance (did attend vs. did not attend) and failure change are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

*Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Intervention Attendance (Did Not Attend vs. Did Attend) and Failure Change*

Failures change	Attendance		$\chi^2 (10)$	<i>p</i>
	Did not attend	Attended		
-4.00	0 [0.7]	2 [1.3]	11.04	.355
-3.00	0 [0.3]	1 [0.7]		
-2.00	3 [1.3]	1 [2.7]		
-1.00	1 [3.3]	9 [6.7]		
-0.50	0 [0.3]	1 [0.7]		
0.00	17 [17.0]	35 [35.0]		
0.50	0 [0.3]	1 [0.7]		
1.00	7 [4.6]	7 [9.4]		
1.50	0 [0.3]	1 [0.7]		
2.00	2 [1.6]	3 [3.4]		
3.00	0 [0.3]	1 [0.7]		

*Note.* Numbers in brackets represent expected values of the chi-square.

To be certain the assumption of expected cell values was met, the researcher analyzed the 3 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance (did attend vs. did not attend) and failure trend (decreased vs. no change vs. increased). No cells had an expected value less than five, meeting the assumption. The 3 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance and failure trend was not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 (2) = 1.31, p = .520$ ) suggesting that there was not a statistically significant relationship between intervention attendance and failure trend. Therefore, the researcher did not reject  $H_{02}$ : There will be no difference in the number of course failures of students before and after attending the summer school transitional program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend. The results of the 3 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance (did attend vs. did not attend) and failure trend (decreased vs. no change, vs. increased) are presented in Table 8.

Table 8

*Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Intervention Attendance (Did Not Attend vs. Did Attend) and Failure Trend*

Failures trend	Attendance		$\chi^2 (2)$	<i>p</i>
	Did not attend	Attended		
Decreased	9 [8.5]	17 [17.5]	1.31	.520
No change	12 [14.3]	32 [29.7]		
Increased	9 [7.2]	13 [14.8]		

*Note.* Numbers in brackets represent expected values of the chi-square.

### Research Question 3

How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' behavior, when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?

**H<sub>03</sub>:** There will be no difference in the number of behavior referrals for students before and after they attended the summer school transition program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.

To assess Research Question 3, the researcher conducted two chi-squares (tests-of-independence) to determine if a statistically significant relationship existed between students' referrals based on intervention attendance (did not attend vs. did attend). For Research Question 3, the first chi-square was conducted between the number of referrals and intervention attendance. Because the degrees of freedom were high for the first chi-square analysis (15), the researcher conducted a second chi-square analysis. For the second analysis, the researcher recoded the referral data to indicate a decrease in referrals, no change in referrals, or an increase in referrals. With the recoded data, the degrees of freedom for the second chi-square analysis (2) were more appropriate for the sample size.

To be certain the assumption of expected cell values was met, the researcher analyzed the 16 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance and referrals change. Twenty-eight (87.5%) cells had expected values less than five and eight cells had values of zero, violating the assumption. Results should be interpreted with caution. The 16 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance and referrals change was not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 (15) = 11.42, p = .722$ ) suggesting that is not a statistically significant relationship between intervention attendance and referral change. Therefore, the researcher did not reject H<sub>03</sub>: There will be no difference in the number of behavior

referrals for students before and after they attended the summer school transition program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend. The results of the 16 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance (did attend vs. did not attend) and referral change are presented in Table 9.

Table 9

*Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Intervention Attendance (Did Not Attend vs. Did Attend) and Referral Change*

Referrals change	Attendance		$\chi^2$ (15)	p
	Did not attend	Attended		
-10.00	1 [0.3]	0 [0.7]	11.42	.722
-6.00	0 [0.3]	1 [0.7]		
-5.00	0 [0.3]	1 [0.7]		
-4.00	1 [0.7]	1 [1.3]		
-2.00	3 [2.3]	4 [4.7]		
-1.00	6 [4.6]	8 [9.4]		
0.00	11 [12.7]	28 [26.3]		
1.00	3 [2.9]	6 [6.1]		
2.00	0 [0.7]	2 [1.3]		
3.00	1 [1.3]	3 [2.7]		
4.00	1 [1.0]	2 [2.0]		
5.00	1 [1.3]	3 [2.7]		
6.00	0 [0.3]	1 [0.7]		
7.00	0 [0.7]	2 [1.3]		

10.00	1 [0.3]	0 [0.7]
13.00	1 [0.3]	0 [0.7]

*Note.* Numbers in brackets represent expected values of the chi-square.

To be certain the assumption of expected cell values was met, the researcher analyzed the 3 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance (did attend vs. did not attend) and referral trend (decreased vs. no change vs. increased). No cells had an expected value less than five and no cells had values of zero, meeting the assumption. The 3 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance and referral trend was not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 (2) = 1.57, p = .457$ ) suggesting that there was not a statistically significant relationship between intervention attendance and referral trend. Therefore, the researcher did not reject  $H_{03}$ : There will be no difference in the number of behavior referrals for students before and after they attended the summer school transition program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend. The results of the 3 x 2 chi-square analysis with intervention attendance (did attend vs. did not attend) and referral trend (decreased, no change, increased) are presented in Table 10.

Table 10

*Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Intervention Attendance (Did Not Attend vs. Did Attend) and Referral Trend*

Referrals trend	Attendance		$\chi^2 (2)$	<i>p</i>
	Did not attend	Attended		
Decreased	11 [8.5]	15 [17.5]	1.57	.457
No change	11 [12.7]	28 [26.3]		
Increased	8 [8.8]	19 [18.2]		



*Note.* Numbers in brackets represent expected values of the chi-square.

#### **Research Question 4**

How did students' grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) impact students' attendance?

**H<sub>04</sub>:** There will be no difference in students' attendance based on grade level.

To assess Research Question 4, the researcher conducted two chi-squares (tests-of-independence) to determine if a statistically significant relationship existed between students absences (numerical change and trend) based on grade level (seventh, eighth, and ninth). For Research Question 4, the researcher conducted the first chi-square analysis between students' absences and grade levels. Because the degrees of freedom were high for the first chi-square analysis (40), the researcher conducted a second chi-square analysis. For the second analysis, the researcher recoded the absence data to indicate a decrease in absences, no change in absences, or an increase in absences. With the recoded data, the researcher determined the degrees of freedom (4) were more appropriate for the sample size.

To be certain the assumption of expected cell values was met, the researcher analyzed the 21 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level and absence change. All 63 (100.0%) cells had expected values less than five and 20 cells had values of zero, violating the assumption. Results should be interpreted with caution. The 21 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level and absence change was not statistically significant ( $\chi^2(40) = 41.27, p = .415$ ) suggesting that there was not a statistically significant relationship between the students' grade level and absences. Therefore, the researcher did not reject H<sub>04</sub>: There will be no difference in students' attendance based on grade level. The results

of the 21 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level (seventh, eighth, and ninth) and absence change are presented in Table 11.

Table 11

*Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Absence Change*

Absence change	Grade level			$\chi^2$ (40)	<i>p</i>
	Seventh	Eighth	Ninth		
-13.00	0 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	1 [0.3]	41.27	.415
-10.00	0 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	1 [0.3]		
-9.00	0 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	1 [0.3]		
-6.00	0 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	1 [0.3]		
-5.00	0 [1.6]	4 [2.4]	2 [2.0]		
-4.00	1 [1.6]	2 [2.4]	3 [2.0]		
-3.00	0 [1.6]	1 [2.4]	5 [2.0]		
-2.00	3 [1.6]	2 [2.4]	1 [2.0]		
-1.00	1 [1.1]	1 [1.6]	2 [1.3]		
0.00	5 [3.0]	3 [4.4]	3 [3.6]		
1.00	1 [2.4]	4 [3.6]	4 [2.9]		
2.00	4 [3.0]	6 [4.4]	1 [3.6]		
3.00	5 [3.0]	4 [4.4]	2 [3.6]		
4.00	1 [1.4]	3 [2.0]	1 [1.6]		
5.00	1 [0.5]	1 [0.8]	0 [0.7]		
6.00	1 [1.1]	3 [1.6]	0 [1.3]		

7.00	1 [0.5]	0 [0.8]	1 [0.7]
8.00	0 [0.3]	1 [0.4]	0 [0.3]
9.00	0 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	1 [0.3]
10.00	1 [0.5]	1 [0.8]	0 [0.7]
27.00	0 [0.3]	1 [0.4]	0 [0.3]

*Note.* Numbers in brackets represent expected values of the chi-square.

To be certain the assumption of expected cell values was met, the researcher analyzed the 3 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level (seventh, eighth, and ninth) and absence trend (decreased, no change, and increased). Three (33.3%) cells had expected values less than five, violating the assumption. No cells have values of zero. Results should be interpreted with caution. The 3 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level and absence trend was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(4) = 11.63, p = .020$ ) suggesting that there is a statistically significant relationship between grade level and absence trend. The researcher did not anticipate that the ninth grade students' absences would decrease. Furthermore, the researcher did not expect the eighth grade students' absences would increase. Therefore, the researcher partially rejected **H<sub>04</sub>**: There will be no difference in students' attendance based on grade level. The results of the 3 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) and absence trend (decreased vs. no change vs. increased) are presented in Table 12.

Table 12

*Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Absence Trend*

Absence trend	Grade level			$\chi^2(4)$	<i>p</i>
	Seventh	Eighth	Ninth		

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Decreased	5 [8.7]	10 [12.9]	17 [10.4]	11.63	.020
No change	5 [3.0]	3 [4.4]	3 [3.6]		
Increased	15 [13.3]	24 [18.7]	10 [16.0]		

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*Note.* Numbers in brackets represent expected values of the chi-square.

### **Research Question 5**

How did the students' grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) impact students' grades?

**H<sub>05</sub>:** There will be no difference in the students' course failures based on grade level.

To assess Research Question 5, the researcher conducted two chi-squares (tests-of-independence) to determine if a statistically significant difference existed between students failures based on grade levels (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth). For Research Question 5, the researcher conducted the first chi-square between students' course failures and their grade level. Because the degrees of freedom were high for the first chi-square analysis (20), the researcher conducted a second chi-square analysis. For the second analysis, the researcher recoded the failure data to indicate a decrease in failures, no change in failures, or an increase in failures. With the recoded data, the degrees of freedom for the second chi-square analysis (4) were more appropriate for the sample size. To be certain the assumption of expected cell values was met, the researcher analyzed the 11 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level and failures change. Twenty-nine (87.9%) cells had expected values less than five and 12 cells had values of zero, violating the assumption. Results should be interpreted with caution. The 11 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level and failure change was not statistically significant ( $\chi^2(20) = 15.52, p =$

.746) suggesting there was not a statistically significant relationship between grade level and failure change. Therefore, the researcher did not reject  $H_{05}$ . There will be no difference in the students' course failures based on grade level. The results of the 11 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) and failure change are presented in Table 13.

Table 13

*Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Failure Change*

Failures change	Grade level			$\chi^2$ (20)	<i>p</i>
	Seventh	Eighth	Ninth		
-4.00	1 [0.5]	1 [0.8]	0 [0.7]	15.52	.746
-3.00	1 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	0 [0.3]		
-2.00	1 [1.1]	3 [1.6]	0 [1.3]		
-1.00	2 [2.7]	5 [4.0]	3 [3.3]		
-0.50	0 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	1 [0.3]		
0.00	14 [14.1]	20 [20.9]	18 [17.0]		
0.50	0 [0.3]	1 [0.4]	0 [0.3]		
1.00	4 [3.8]	6 [5.6]	4 [4.6]		
1.50	0 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	1 [0.3]		
2.00	2 [1.4]	1 [2.0]	2 [1.6]		
3.00	0 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	1 [0.3]		

*Note.* Numbers in brackets represent expected values of the chi-square.

To be certain the assumption of expected cell values was met, the researcher

analyzed the 3 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level (seventh, eighth, and ninth) and failure trend (decreased vs. no change vs. increased). No cells had expected values less than five and no cells has a value of zero, meeting the assumption. The 3 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level and failure trend was not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 (4) = 0.62, p = .961$ ) suggesting there was not a statistically significant relationship between grade level and failure trend. Therefore, the researcher did not reject  $H_{05}$ : There will be no difference in the students' course failures based on grade level. The results of the 3 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) and failure trend (decreased vs. no change vs. increased) are presented in Table 14.

Table 14

*Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Failure Trend*

Failures trend	Grade level			$\chi^2 (4)$	<i>p</i>
	Seventh	Eighth	Ninth		
Decreased	6 [7.1]	11 [10.5]	9 [8.5]	0.62	.961
No change	13 [12.0]	18 [17.7]	13 [14.3]		
Increased	6 [6.0]	8 [8.8]	8 [7.2]		

*Note.* Numbers in brackets represent expected values of the chi-square.

### **Research Question 6**

How did students' grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) impact students' behavior?

$H_{06}$ : There will be no difference in the number of behavior referrals for students based on grade level.

To assess Research Question 6, the researcher conducted two chi-squares (tests-of-independence) to determine if a statistically significant difference existed between students' referrals based on grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth). For Research Question 6, the researcher conducted the first chi-square between the referrals and grade level. Because the degrees of freedom were high for the first chi-square analysis (30), the researcher conducted a second chi-square analysis. For the second analysis, the researcher recoded the referral data to indicate a decrease in referrals, no change in referrals, or an increase in referrals. With the recoded data, the degrees of freedom for the second chi-square analysis (4) were more appropriate for the sample size. To be certain the assumption of expected cell values was met, the researcher analyzed the 16 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level and referral change. Forty-four (91.7%) cells had expected values less than five and 18 cells had values of zero, violating the assumption. Results should be interpreted with caution. The 16 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level and referral change was not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 (30) = 31.83, p = .375$ ) suggesting a statistically significant relationship did not exist between the students' grade level and referral change. Therefore, the researcher did not reject  $H_{06}$ . There will be no difference in the number of behavior referrals for students based on grade level. The results of the 16 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) and referral change are presented in Table 15.

Table 15

*Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Referral Change*

Referrals change	Grade level			$\chi^2 (30)$	<i>p</i>
	Seventh	Eighth	Ninth		

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-10.00	0 [0.3]	1 [0.4]	0 [0.3]	31.83	.375
-6.00	1 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	0 [0.3]		
-5.00	1 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	0 [0.3]		
-4.00	2 [0.5]	0 [0.8]	0 [0.7]		
-2.00	2 [1.9]	2 [2.8]	3 [2.3]		
-1.00	4 [3.8]	5 [5.6]	5 [4.6]		
0.00	10 [10.6]	19 [15.7]	10 [12.7]		
1.00	2 [2.4]	1 [3.6]	6 [2.9]		
2.00	1 [0.5]	1 [0.8]	0 [0.7]		
3.00	0 [1.1]	3 [1.6]	1 [1.3]		
4.00	0 [0.8]	2 [1.2]	1 [1.0]		
5.00	1 [1.1]	2 [1.6]	1 [1.3]		
6.00	1 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	0 [0.3]		
7.00	0 [0.5]	1 [0.8]	1 [0.7]		
10.00	0 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	1 [0.3]		
13.00	0 [0.3]	0 [0.4]	1 [0.3]		

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*Note.* Numbers in brackets represent expected values of the chi-square.

To be certain the assumption of expected cell values was met, the researcher analyzed the 3 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) and referral trend (decreased vs. no change vs. increased) No cells had expected values less than five and no cells had values of zero, meeting the assumption. The 3 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level and referral trend was not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 (4) = 5.11$ ,  $p = .276$ ) suggesting there was not a statistically significant relationship between the



students' grade level and referral trend. Therefore, the researcher did not reject  $H_{06}$ . There will be no difference in the number of behavior referrals for students based on grade level. The results of the 3 x 3 chi-square analysis with grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) and referral trend (decreased vs. no change vs. increased) are presented in Table 16.

Table 16

*Chi-square (Test-of-Independence) on Grade Level (Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth) and Referral Trend*

Referrals trend	Grade level			$\chi^2$ (4)	<i>p</i>
	Seventh	Eighth	Ninth		
Decreased	10 [7.1]	8 [10.5]	8 [8.5]	5.11	.276
No change	10 [10.6]	19 [15.7]	10 [12.7]		
Increased	5 [7.3]	10 [10.9]	12 [8.8]		

*Note.* Numbers in brackets represent expected values of the chi-square.

### Summary

This causal-comparative study utilized convenience sampling of a treatment and control group to determine if any statistically significant differences existed in students' grades, attendance, and behavior based on either participation in the summer transition program or grade level. The researcher conducted a series of chi-square analyses to determine if any relationship that existed between summer school transition program participation or grade level and students' grades, attendance, or behavior. The chi-square test for summer school transition program participation and attendance was significant, rejecting the null hypothesis  $H_{01}$ , there will be no difference in the number of course

failures of students before and after attending the summer school transitional program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend. Analysis of the data also revealed a statistically significant result for the relationship between the students' grade level and absence trend, with the ninth grade students' absences decreasing and the eighth grade students' absences increasing. Chapter 5 of this manuscript discusses this study's results further as well as this study's limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The previous chapter presented results of using a chi-square analysis to determine if there were differences in attendance, grades, and behavior based on students' grade levels (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) and participation in the summer transition program (attended vs. did not attend). The purpose of this chapter is to review and discuss this study's findings.

### **Restatement of the Research Questions and Null Hypotheses**

The following research questions and corresponding null hypothesis guided this research study:

**Research Question 1.** How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' attendance when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?

*Null hypothesis 1.* There will be no difference in the attendance of students before and after they attended the summer school transitional program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.

**Research question 2.** How did participation in the summer school transition program impact students' grades when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?

*Null hypothesis 2.* There will be no difference in the number of course failures of students before and after attending the summer school transitional program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.

**Research Question 3.** How did participation in the summer school transition

program impact students' behavior when compared to students who were invited but did not attend?

*Null hypothesis 3.* There will be no difference in the number of behavior referrals for students before and after they attended the summer school transition program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.

**Research question 4.** How did students' grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) impact students' attendance?

*Null hypothesis 4.* There will be no difference in students' attendance based on grade level.

**Research question 5.** How did the students' grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) impact students' grades?

*Null hypothesis 5.* There will be no difference in the students' course failures based on grade level.

**Research question 6.** How did students' grade level (seventh vs. eighth vs. ninth) impact students' behavior?

*Null hypothesis 6.* There will be no difference in the number of behavior referrals for students based on grade level.

## **Summary of Findings**

### **Student Attendance**

The researcher measured students' attendance based on the number of absences a student had during each year of this study, including the year prior to and the year following the summer school transition program. In the school year prior to the summer transitional program, the mean number of absences for seventh grade students was 4.20, 7.57 for eighth grade students, and 7.57 for the ninth grade students. In the school year

following the summer transitional program, the mean number of absences for seventh grade students was 6.00, 9.51 for eighth grade students, and 6.00 for ninth grade students.

The chi-square analysis of intervention attendance (did attend vs. did not attend) and absence change yielded a significant result ( $p = .022$ ), indicating a difference in number of absences between students who did attend the summer transition program and students who were invited but did not attend. The chi-square analysis of intervention attendance and absence trend (decreased, no change, or increased) also yielded a significant result ( $p = .018$ ). Contrary to the researcher's expectation, the students who did not attend the summer transition had decreased absences; therefore, the researcher rejected the null hypothesis  $H_{01}$ : *there will be no difference in the students' attendance before and after they attended the summer school transitional program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.*

The chi-square analysis of students' grade level (seventh, eighth, and ninth) and absence change did not produce statistically significant results. However, the chi-square analysis of student grade level and absence trend did produce statistically significant results ( $p = .020$ ). Contrary to the researcher's expectation, the ninth graders had fewer absences, indicating an improvement in attendance among ninth graders. Conversely, the eighth graders' absences increased, which the researcher did not expect. Therefore, the researcher rejected the null hypothesis  $H_{04}$ : *there will be no difference in students' attendance based on grade level.*

### **Student Grades**

The researcher measured students' grades based on the number of classes a student failed during the school year prior to the intervention and the school year following the intervention. Both the school district and the state, consider a course grade

of 69% or lower as a failing grade. Elementary and middle school grades are reported as one end-of-year course average while high school grades are reported each semester. Ninth grade students have the opportunity to earn a total of six credits during the school year; if they earned less than six credits, then the researcher determined they have a failing grade. Ninth grade students who passed all of their classes during the academic year received six credit units toward graduation. Yet, it is possible for high school students to earn half credit if one semester of a course is passed and the other semester is not.

In year prior to the summer transitional program, the mean number of failures for seventh grade students was .080, 0.65 for eighth grade students, and 0.50 for the ninth grade students. In the school year following the summer transitional program, the mean number of failures for seventh grade students was 0.68, 0.47 for eighth grade students, and .080 for ninth grade students.

The chi-square analysis of intervention attendance (did attend vs. did not attend) and failure change did not produce a significant result; nor did the chi-square analysis of intervention attendance and failure trend (decreased, no change, or increased). Therefore, the researcher cannot reject the null hypothesis  $H_{02}$ : *There will be no difference in the number of course failures for students before and after attending the summer school transitional program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.*

The chi-square analysis of student grade level (seventh, eighth, and ninth) and failure change did not produce a significant result, nor did the chi-square analysis student grade level and failure trend (decreased, no change, or increased). Therefore, the researcher accepted the null hypothesis  $H_{02}$ : *There will be no difference in the number of course failures of students based on grade level.*

## **Student Behavior**

The researcher measured students' behavior based on the number of teacher or administrator generated behavioral office referrals a student received throughout the school year prior to and the school year following the intervention. In year prior to the summer transitional program, the mean number of office referrals for seventh grade students was 2.04, 1.49 for eighth grade students, and 1.17 for the ninth grade students. In the school year following the summer transitional program the mean number of office referrals for seventh grade students was 1.60, 1.97 for eighth grade students, and 2.40 for ninth grade students.

The chi-square analysis of intervention attendance (did attend vs. did not attend) and office referral change did not produce a significant result, nor did the chi-square analysis of intervention attendance and office referral trend (decreased, no change, or increased). Therefore, the researcher accepted the null hypothesis  $H_{03}$ : *there will be no difference in the number of behavior referrals for students before and after they attended the summer school transition program when compared to students who were invited but did not attend.*

The chi-square analysis of student grade level (seventh, eighth, and ninth) and office referral change did not produce a significant result, nor did the chi-square analysis student grade level and office referral trend (decreased, no change, or increased). Therefore, the researcher cannot reject the null hypothesis  $H_{06}$ : *there will be no difference in the number of behavior referrals for students based on grade level.*

## **Discussion of Findings**

The primary goal of the summer school transition program is to better prepare at-risk students as they move from one grade level to another. The program covers the following transitional points: (a) the move from sixth grade in an elementary school to seventh grade in a middle school, (b) the move from seventh to eighth grade within the same middle school, and (c) the move eighth grade in the middle school to ninth grade in the high school. Data did not indicate that participating in the summer transition program had any impact on students' attendance, grades, or behavior. However, students who were invited but did not attend the summer school transition program had fewer absences in the school year following the program. This finding does not imply that the program was ineffective; yet, it does imply that the program did not have an effect on the selected variables. Summer acceleration programs can benefit students as they transition from one grade or school to another (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

Furthermore the researcher did not find a distinct difference between the behavior or number of course failures of students who attended the program and students who were invited but did not attend, which contradicts previous studies' findings. Theriot and Dupper (2009) found that student discipline referrals increase significantly from elementary to middle school. In contrast, this study found there was not a significant increase in student discipline referrals from sixth grade in the elementary school to seventh grade in the middle school, regardless of their participation in the summer transition program.

Barber and Olsen (2004) reported that students transitioning from elementary school to middle school experienced stresses and problems that are similar to those students who are transitioning from middle school to high school. This study made a



similar conclusion as there was not a statistically significant difference across grade levels in terms of behavior or course failures.

There is a stark contrast between this study's findings and Roderick and Camburn's 1999 study in which 40% of their students had multiple course failures during their freshman year and struggled to recover. This study's findings also contradict Barone et al. (1991) who found a significant drop in academic performance when students entered high school. Aslpaugh (1997) and Smith (1998) also found that students were most likely to fall behind during their freshman year. This study found no significant change in students' grades as they transitioned from middle school to high school. In regard to students' grades declining during the transition from middle to high school, this study's findings could provide insight into the characteristics of successful transition programs.

The researcher is encouraged that the students' overall absences decreased from eighth grade in the middle school to ninth grade in the high school. Truancy is a strong indicator of pre-dropout behavior (Smink & Heilrunn, 2005); documenting an improvement in attendance rates from middle to high school for the students in this study could indicate the presence of some positive intervention that encourages students to attend school consistently. Because the attendance improvement was not specific or restricted to the students who attended the summer transition program, but was found in all of the ninth grade participants, the improvement in attendance cannot be attributed to the summer transition program.

### **Limitations**

By its nature, this research study faced limitations that may later impact the generalizability of its findings and conclusions. Based on the area of study that it could

impact, these limitations include the following: the selection of this study's participants, the consistency of behavioral referrals, attendance priorities at different schools.

When considering limitations related to the selection of study participants, one must consider the study's setting (Ary et al., 2006). The summer transition program took place in a specific school zone within a school district. The primary school in this study, where the summer school transition program took place, was the only middle school in the district eligible to receive Title One funding at the time of the study. The district in which the study took place has a total of seven middle schools, with socioeconomically and racially diverse student populations. Therefore, results at other schools in the district may vary. Likewise, similar summer transition programs conducted in other districts or other states may have different results as well.

The summer transition program targeted a very specific group of students who teachers and administrators identified as likely to benefit from participation. Expanding the selection of students who participate could produce different results. While specific students were targeted to be included in the summer transition program, there were no specific guidelines for teachers or administrators to follow when inviting students to attend the program. Instead, the middle school administration asked teachers of students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades to recommend students who they thought would benefit from the program and based on the students' academic performance and standardized test scores.

While this research study used reportable data in its analysis of the summer transitional program, behavior can be a subjective measure. Even though this study utilized a quantifiable measure for behavior, which was the number of office referrals students received, it is difficult for a teacher to determine when a student's behavior

necessitates an office referral. Because behavior is somewhat subjective, the decision to give a student an office referral is also subjective and could vary from one teacher to another.

The program was staffed by teachers who were willing to spend time during their summer working with students. While the school district compensated the teachers for their time, participation was not mandatory. As such, these teachers were given the opportunity to build relationships with students prior to the traditional school year, and these relationships could impact student-teacher relations during the upcoming school year. A teacher who spent the summer working with a particular student, or a group of students, may have the opportunity to foster positive behavior habits in these students; in contrast, students who did not attend the summer transition program do not have an opportunity to build relationships with their teachers.

Another limitation of reporting behavior arises from students attending different schools prior to the treatment than following the summer transition program. The seventh graders in this study attended one of three elementary schools for their sixth grade school year, which was prior to the summer transition program and they attended middle school during the school year following the program. The ninth graders in this study attended the middle school in the year prior to the summer transition program and the high school in the year following the program. The eighth graders in this study remained in the same school through the duration of this study. Although the school district sets behavioral guidelines and trains teachers and administrators on appropriate student discipline, it is still possible that some differences exist between schools in regard to what behaviors constitute an office referral.

Interestingly, this study did find a statistically significant difference in the ninth

grade students' school attendance when compared to their eighth grade attendance, irrespective of their participation in the summer school transition program. There was also an increase in student absences across eighth graders regardless of participation in the summer school transition program. While attendance is certainly not a subjective measure, some schools place a greater emphasis on students' attendance. In addition, high school regulations regarding the awarding of course credit is predicated on student attendance whereas middle school credit is not.

The summer school transitional program in this study served students who were eligible for promotion to the next grade level. Students who did not meet the school district's minimum requirements for grade level promotion attended a district mandated summer school in order to recover academic credit. Although grade level promotion and placement is considered on an individual basis, students are generally required to earn passing grades in mathematics, language arts, and reading, as well as either science or social studies. Expanding the summer transitional program to students who are mandated to attend a traditional summer school recovery program could produce different results.

Finally, students who were required to attend a traditional summer school remediation program as a result of failing academic courses during the regular school year were not targeted to attend the summer school transition program. Instead, these students were mandated to attend a traditional summer school program. Students who are unsuccessful during the academic year could benefit from the summer transitional program as well.

### **Implications**

This study took place at a middle school that used a portion of its Title 1 funding to coordinate a summer school transition program for at-risk students. The goal of the

program is to better prepare its student participants for success in the next grade level. This research study determined the effect of a summer school transition program on students' attendance, grades, and behavior. There was no statistically significant change in any of the variables measured from the year prior to participation and for the year following their participation in the summer transition program.

Although there was marked change in the students' attendance from seventh to eighth grade and from eighth to ninth grade in this study, it was not dependent on the students participating in the summer transition program. The decrease in eighth grade attendance supports the findings of other research that indicates student attendance declines during this time period (Balfanz et al, 2007). The improvement in ninth grade attendance does not support such research. As the ninth grade attendance improvement was not tied to summer school transition program participation there is likely another reason the ninth students' attendance improved during this time period. The students are in a new school, and they have new administrators and teachers. The high school places all first-time freshmen into a freshman academy program. This program houses all freshmen in a separate school building with specific teachers who closely monitor students' progress.

Smith (1997) found students attending schools with well-developed transition programs had higher levels of academic success than schools lacking successful programs. When examining the students' attendance, it is possible that the strengths of the freshman academy experience influenced the outcomes of the summer transition program. Chymelynski (2004) noted the positive freshman academies have on students' academics and behavior.

The summer school transition program provided students with an opportunity to

work in small-group settings during their summer. This provided them with the opportunity to receive more attention from their prospective teachers and to build community within their classrooms. Both academic and social support aid the transition process while smaller educational settings improve academics, behavior, attendance, and attitudes (Cotton, 1996; Oates et al, 1998; Patterson et al., 2007; Thornburg, 1981).

In summary, middle school students send warning signs that they are disengaging from the education process, including attendance, behavior, and course failures (Balfan et al., 2007; Swanson, 2005). Even though at-risk students were targeted for participation in this summer transition program, there was no specific determination as to what constituted an at-risk student. Instead, teachers were asked to identify students they felt were at-risk and could benefit from attending the program. With this in mind, a set of specific criteria could be developed to identify students who could benefit from a summer transitional program. Using existing research regarding the warning sign students begin sending in elementary and middle school, teachers and administrators could target specific students for participation in the summer transition program, as well as monitor the progress of at-risk students who participate in the summer transition program to determine which students need more support or intervention by school personnel.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study occurred in a very specific setting, and it targeted a specific group of students. In order to determine the effect of summer transition programs, expanding a study such as this to other schools would provide additional data. The particular transition program included in this study took place at the school district's only Title 1 middle school, which is unrelated to student instruction but provided the funding for the school to implement the program. Other middle schools in the district do not qualify for Title I

funding, but they do have students who are considered at-risk and could benefit from participating in a similar program. Additional research on an expanded program at multiple schools could provide additional insight and a comprehensive perspective into the summer transition program's impact.

Mizelle and Irvin (2005) asserted that the transitional process should be seamless and consistent from one level to the next. Currently, the school district school lacks an established summer transition program. Frequently, program-based administrators are given few guidelines on how to structure the curriculum for students during intensive summer intervention programs. Research into effective summer transitional practices could benefit all of those involved in the transition process.

A review of this study could raise questions for further research. While this study did not indicate that attending the summer school transitional program had an impact on students' grades, attendance, or behavior, this program could impact students in other areas, academically or socially within their new educational setting. Determining if there is any correlation between summer program participation and students' scores on the Georgia Criterion Reference Competency Test (GCRCT) or the End of Course Test (EOCT) could provide more specific data regarding students' academic performance. Similarly, students' course averages prior to and following participation in a summer school transition program could provide additional data than this study's review of course failures.

The researcher believes additional studies regarding student attendance could expand upon this study's findings. In particular, this study found that students who did not attend the summer school transition program had a decrease in absences. Because there was a positive change in attendance for students who did not attend the summer

school transition program, including multiple years when examining these students' attendance records could provide further insight into their attendance pattern.

The relationship students and teachers develop can play a pivotal role in a student's decision to either drop out or remain in school (Catterall, 1998; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Miller, 2000; Rumberger, 1995). Further analysis of the relationships that were formed during the summer transition program, both positive and negative, could provide insight into the impact that interacting in a less-formal summer setting has on students and teachers. This was a quantitative study; therefore, it only included data that were analyzed numerically. However, not all student and teacher experiences are quantifiable. A qualitative study investigating student and teacher participants' experiences and impressions of the summer school transitional program could provide insight into the program's other effects.

In addition to analyzing student and teachers experiences and impressions of the summer transition program, a study which focuses on exploring students' feelings about completing high school or dropping out before and after participating in the summer transition program could provide additional insight, particularly for students transitioning into ninth grade.

This study began with 121 students. Twenty nine of the students who were originally targeted for participation in the summer transitional program were excluded because they changed schools, either transferring within the school district or moving outside district boundaries. Alspaugh (2011) found that student mobility or transferring schools at a non-traditional point increases their risk of dropping out of school. Following the students who changed schools or left the district could allow researchers to investigate how the grades, attendance, and behavior changed from one year to the next



for students who attended the summer transition program but changed schools during the next school year.

### **Conclusion**

While educational transitions are of great importance to the overall success of a student's educational career, transitions are certainly a part of life and have been since the beginning of time. John the Baptist was sent to prepare people for the coming of Christ, in fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3 "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (NIV). He was a part of God's plan for transition. John the Baptist taught his followers how to prepare themselves for Jesus, spreading the Christian message of love and charity before his followers knew of Jesus, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same" (Luke 3:10, NIV). Teaching children and preparing them for their futures is an essential part of education. The Book of Proverbs says "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it" (Prov. 22:6; NIV). Albert Bandura's Theory of Efficacy was not the first to assert that proper preparation and success will build upon success and enable a person to continue along their path of success, the idea has been present in God's Word for thousands of years.

This study sought to determine if a summer school transition program and student grade level had any impact on students' attendance, grades, or behavior. While the increase in student absences from seventh to eighth grade and the decrease in the student absences from eighth to ninth grade were the only statistically significant changes that occurred regardless of participation in the summer school transition program. This indicates that another variable affects students' attendance when they enter high school.

The lack of statistical differences between the treatment group and the control group of students does not indicate that the program lacked merit or value to the students who participated. Instead, it underscores the need for further research in order to determine the effect the summer transition programs has on participating students.

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**APPENDIX A**

**IRB Approval**

## Appendix A: IRB Approval

January 4, 2012

Katie Smith  
IRB Exemption 1233.01042012: Effects of Summer School Transitional Program on Student Grades,  
Attendance, and Behavior

Dear Katie,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and that no further IRB oversight is required unless your data collection extends past the one year approval granted by this memo, in which case you would submit the annual review form attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101 (b)(4), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:

(4) Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and that any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption, or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,



**Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.**  
*IRB Chair, Associate Professor*  
**Center for Counseling & Family Studies**

(434) 592-5054

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