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Freshman Academy: Making the High School Transition

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Tracy L. Srofe

August 2009

Advisor: Dr. Edith King

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## ABSTRACT

Numerous freshman transition programs are conducted throughout the nation to address the middle school to high school transition issue. The current study focuses on a high school transition model, the Freshman Academy, to improve ninth-grade attendance, academic achievement, and school engagement for at-risk students. School engagement encompasses three interrelated components: emotion, behavior, and cognition.

The current study used a quasi-experimental pre- and posttest comparison design with no random assignment to measure the impact of the Freshman Academy on attendance, academic achievement, and school engagement. Student interviews were conducted to see what aspects of the Freshman Academy promote school engagement and what improvements could be made to the Freshman Academy program. The target population was the ninth-grade students who had been identified as at risk at a high school outside Denver, Colorado. The research was conducted using their Freshman Academy students and a comparison group.

An independent t-test was used to test for differences in the three areas of school engagement for the Freshman Academy and comparison group. A paired sample t-test was used to compare the eighth-grade and ninth-grade unexcused absences and GPA. The results from the Student Survey on School Engagement showed that for behavioral engagement the comparison group had higher levels of engagement at the end than the Freshman Academy. For cognitive and emotional engagement there were no differences.

Pre- and post-GPAs for the Freshman Academy showed no change. For unexcused absences, the averages were significantly different from eighth to ninth grade. Truancies, measured by unexcused absences, were reduced by two-thirds.

Qualitative findings were quite different from those results from the school engagement survey, attendance data, and GPA data. From the student interviews, the students commonly reported that the Freshman Academy was “like a family.” The respondents felt like the teachers cared about them, showed the relevance of what they were teaching, and used a variety of instructional strategies to maintain the interest of their students. According to the students, the improvements that could be made to the Freshman Academy program included aspects of the environment, teacher-student relationship, and curriculum and instruction.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Time is of the essence; not only must federal and state benchmarks be met, but, more important, each minute wasted means less time spent addressing the needs of students not achieving at acceptable levels. More than 13 million students currently in high school rely on principals and teachers to help them fulfill their dreams, to reach heights never before imagined, and to embrace a lifelong love of learning (National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), 2004, p. xv).

Even with the No Child Left Behind act in place, the reality is that thousands of ninth graders are being left behind as a result of problems associated with the middle school to high school transition. On February, 27, 2007, The Denver Post reported on the front page “Grim forecast for struggling high schoolers.” Sherry, a Denver Post staff writer, cites that struggling students across the Denver metro area are not likely to improve academically; and some may decline in core subjects as they move on through high school, based on data of individual student scores over a four-year period collected by the Colorado Department of Education. Research on school reform indicates that the problem could stem from the structure of traditional high schools and lack of personalization—“students are shuffled to several classes a day and teachers see more than 100 students in seven hours” (Sherry, 2007, p. A4). High school principals interviewed in the article agreed that attention needs to be given at all levels—elementary, middle, and high school level—to identify and address the needs of students who are behind.

Pantleo (1992) reported a decline in grades and attendance resulting in an increase in the number of failures in the ninth grade (as cited in Chapman & Sawyer, 2001). Supporting these findings the Texas Center for Educational Research (2002) found that retention rate and dropout rate at the end of the ninth-grade year is higher than at any other time in a child's K-12 education (as cited in Marshall, 2003). This issue in educational reform calls for something to be done. Wasley, Hampel and Clark (1997) maintained that schools aiming to increase student achievement must "tap the voices" of at-risk students and address the needs students indicate as contributors to their performance in school (as cited in Lee, 1999). "Taking the initiative to change the pattern of failure by thinking outside the traditional educational box is essential to change the pattern" (Marshall, 2003, p. 8).

#### Statement of the Problem

Why do we need freshman (ninth grade) transition programs? The ninth grade is the pivotal year for high school students. During the freshman year the students are trying to find their own identity or latch onto others. Lee (1999) reported that students found the novelty of different social groups and the students admitted to falling into the "wrong crowd" during their freshman year. Also, students begin taking responsibility for their own education. It is usually the first time students have to pass classes to earn credits, to navigate large school facilities, and to experience an increased amount of content covered per class. Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) cite that as schools get larger, they become more impersonal and less able to care for their students. "Some critics have likened secondary schools to overcrowded airports where students have to rush between lessons like dashing

between flights, and where they have little or no space, no place to belong of their own” (p. 12). They also have an increased need for independent study skills and for knowledge of the procedures for scheduling, locker assignments, textbook check out, and lunch. Ninth-grade students must master many new skills to succeed in high school.

In a NASSP study over 20 years ago, after shadowing ninth-grade students and observing their school experiences in 48 states and the District of Columbia, Lounsbury and Johnston found a mismatch between school policies and practices and developmental needs of 14-year-olds (Black, 2004). Most instruction was teacher centered, with 40- to 50-minute classes, and little teacher-student interaction. Also, they found that most high schools offered little or no guidance to support ninth-grade students’ adjustment academically or socially. Lounsbury and Johnston predicted the ninth grade would “continue to drift” and “mirror the worst of outmoded high school practices that do little to foster positive learning for all students” (Black, 2004, p. 43).

In the 1970s, Walt Haney, researcher for Boston College’s Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy, found attrition rates between grades nine and ten was 5% or less. By the mid 1990s, attrition rates between these grades rose to 10%, about 400,000 students nationwide each year (Black, 2004). Furthermore, Haney’s studies in Texas and other states, conducted in 2000 and 2001 showed “70 to 80 percent of students who fail to pass ninth grade will not graduate from high school” (Black, 2004, p.44). Clearly the trend shows an increased failure in academic achievement for ninth-grade students across the country.

Ninth-grade students who are not connected and not engaged in high school are at risk for dropping out. Wheelock (1993) calls ninth grade “a minefield for the most vulnerable students,” especially those who become disengaged and discouraged and fail to develop strong bonds with their teachers and school (Black, 2004). When students feel that their teachers and school are uncaring and inhospitable, the attachment to school is easily broken. Wheelock cites tedious lessons, overcrowded classrooms, and indifferent teachers among the factors diminishing students’ fragile attachment to school. Likewise, Audas and Willms (2001) conclude that school engagement is a key factor in school success. School engagement as defined by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) encompasses three domains: behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement. Behavioral engagement has been linked to dropping out (Rumberger, 1995). Little evidence is given that cognitive and emotional engagements are linked to dropping out. All three domains predicate participating in school, academic achievement, and establishing relationships in school.

Numerous freshman transition programs are conducted throughout the nation to address the difficult middle school to high school transition issue. The current study focuses on a high school transition model to improve ninth-grade attendance, academic achievement, and school engagement for at-risk students. School engagement is absent in the literature of high school transition interventions; however, it plays a role in a student’s school success.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was (a) to determine whether a high school transition program, the Freshman Academy, for at-risk ninth grade students improves attendance, academic achievement, and school engagement; (b) to explore what aspects of the Freshman Academy promote school engagement; and (c) to determine what improvements could be made to the Freshman Academy program.

## Research Questions

This study was guided by three research questions:

Question 1: What is the impact of the Freshman Academy on (a) attendance, (b) academic achievement, and (c) school engagement?

Question 2: According to students, what aspects of the Freshman Academy promote school engagement?

Question 3: According to students, what improvements could be made to the Freshman Academy program?

## Rationale for the Study

Of any grade, the ninth grade has the highest failure rate. This significantly increases the probability that students will not graduate high school. As a result, school districts and schools are placing more of an emphasis on helping students make middle school to high school transition. Special efforts are being made to help students complete the ninth grade successfully. Through the review of literature, I have become increasingly more aware of the significance of students' transition into high school, the importance of connections with teachers and the school, and the need for students to feel a sense of

belonging to their school. It is those students who are disengaged from school and at risk of not completing high school for whom I am most concerned. This brings me to my current study where I hope to gain and contribute information regarding school engagement of at-risk students. This type of study is supported by Fredricks et al. (2004),

One important area for future inquiry is the impact of school and classroom interventions on behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Widely implemented school reforms where the goal is to increase achievement, not explicitly to improve engagement, often implicitly target aspects of the context that affect engagement. Including measures of engagement in these intervention studies can provide insight into the degree to which engagement is the mediator between context and achievement-related outcomes. To design effective interventions and attain desirable outcomes such as higher achievement and lower dropout rates, it is crucial to ask questions about such connections (p. 85).

Understanding how school engagement contributes to attendance, academic achievement, and overall feelings about school is key to creating a learning environment where all students can be successful.

### Definition of Terms

#### *Academic Achievement*

In this study, academic achievement will be measured using grade point averages (GPAs), an average of grades in all classes.

#### *At-Risk Students*

Students are at risk of failing to obtain a high school diploma with an adequate level of skills due to poor academic performance, histories of disciplinary and/or attendance problems, and retention in grade (Slavin & Madden, 1989; Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), 2002). Some include in this definition socio-economic status (SES), ethnicity, and/or gender (Reyes & Jason, 1991; Slavin & Madden, 1989).

### *Attendance*

In this study, attendance will be measured using the percentage of unexcused absences of the students.

### *Behavioral Engagement*

(a) Positive conduct: following rules, adhering to classroom norms, the absence of disruptive behaviors such as skipping school and getting into trouble (Finn, 1993; Finn, Pannozzo & Voelkl, 1995; Finn & Rock, 1997; Fredricks et al., 2004); (b) Involvement in learning and academic tasks: effort, persistence, concentration, attention, asking questions, and participating in class discussion (Finn et al., 1995; Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993); (c) Participation in school-related activities: athletics, clubs, and student government (Finn, 1993; Finn et al., 1995; Fredricks et al., 2004).

### *Block Scheduling*

Block scheduling restructures the school day into classes lasting approximately 90 minutes, rather than the traditional 50-minute period classes.

### *Cognitive Engagement*

Student's psychological investment in learning, self-regulation and being strategic (Fredricks et al., 2004; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992).

### *Emotional Engagement*

Student's emotional responses and psychological sense of connectedness or bonding to teachers, classmates, academics, and school (Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

### *Freshman Academy*

The Freshman Academy program, sometimes referred to as a Ninth-Grade Academy, under study is a school-within-a school “where students who were identified as at-risk for failure could receive instruction in study skills and strategies for organization” (Fulk, 2003, p. 8). In addition, students are assigned to an interdisciplinary team for four hours of blocked classes. Teachers have a common planning period to collaborate about specific student needs, as well as to design lessons and strategies to address those needs. Classrooms are situated in close proximity or isolated in a separate building.

### *Interdisciplinary Teams*

Interdisciplinary teams, also known as teacher teaming, organize teachers from different subject areas into groups of varying numbers with an assigned common area of the school plant, a common schedule, and responsibility for a common group of students (Hecht, Roberts, Schoon, & Flansler, 1995).

### *School Engagement*

(a) Student’s participation in and identifying in a positive manner with school;  
(b) “Student’s psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote” (Newmann et al., 1992, p. 12); (c) Student’s relationship with school, such as paying attention in class, acknowledging the seriousness of school, and desiring to achieve academically (Libbey, 2004).

### *High School Transition*

The period of acclimation when students leave eighth grade in the middle school and enter ninth grade at the high school.

### *School-Within-A-School*

A separate entity, in this study a Freshman Academy, which plans its own programs and utilizes a shared space with the larger school community, while still under the auspices of the larger school principal.

### Organization of the Study

Chapter One presented the introduction and the background for the study, the research questions, and definition of terms. Chapter Two contains the review of related literature. Chapter Three discusses the methodology used in the study. Chapter Four presents the quantitative results of the Student Survey on School Engagement, achievement data, and attendance data, as well as, discusses the qualitative findings from the student interviews. Chapter Five summarizes the study and includes implications of the study and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

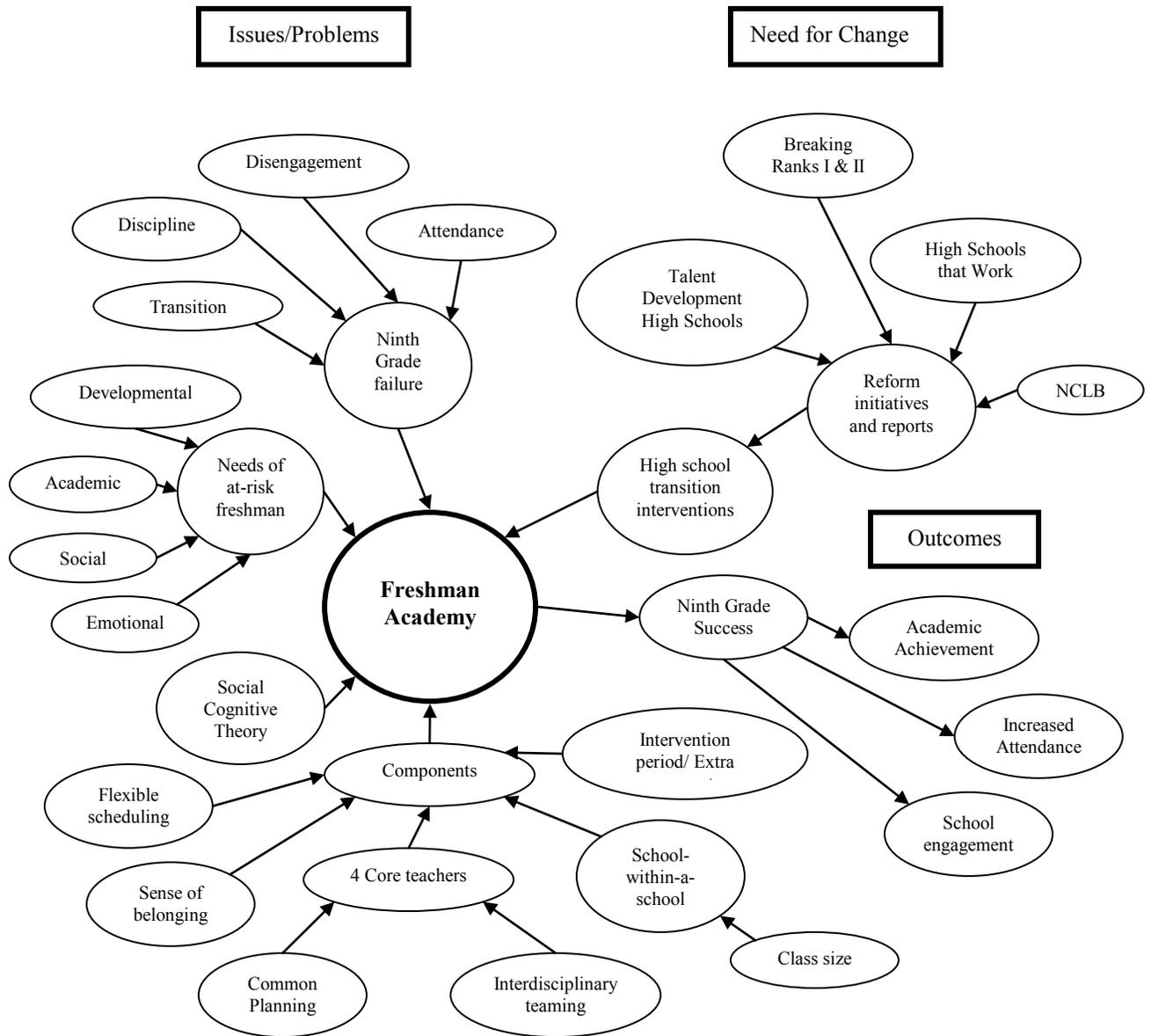
Research shows that personalized learning initiatives can increase attendance, decrease dropout rates, and decrease disruptive behavior. Next, we must engage them—know their interests and how each student learns. Teens are developing academically, socially, and emotionally and physically while they are here. Students will tune in or tune out based on how we engage them in each of those areas (NASSP, 2004, p. 69).

Why is the transition from middle school to high school so critical for students?

Most students experience the double jeopardy of transitioning from elementary school to middle school and again to high school. The review of the literature shows that the transition from middle school to high school is a critical period in a child's K-12 education. Ample research indicates that the ninth grade year is an especially challenging year for students, and numerous studies document the importance of schools playing a more active role in reaching out to ninth grade students and their families (Black, 2004). For students that are identified as at-risk, the adjustments to high school can be even more difficult. The developmental needs—academic, emotional, and social—of these students must be addressed. There are several interventions mentioned that focus on the transition to high school. One such intervention is the Freshman Academy. The social cognitive theory provides the theoretical support for this study. Examples of schools with Freshman Academies using the measures of school success—attendance, behavior, and academic achievement, and engagement—are discussed in this chapter. The final section of the literature review examines the constructs associated with school engagement. School

engagement is cited as a crucial determinant of success in school (Audas & Willms, 2001). The researcher has also included a schematic (Figure 1) of the Freshman Academy approach to assist the reader in following the review of the literature.

**Figure 1. Freshman Academy Model**



(Figure 1 developed by the researcher.)

## High School Reform

What today's high school teachers see when they look out at a sea of students is a hodgepodge of hormones, hairstyles, and heredity. They also see reflections of what lies beneath: abuse, fear, optimism, pain, alienation, distrust, confidence, failure, and a wide range of characteristics and attitudes born of the circumstances that each person has been fortunate to experience or forced to endure (Holland & Mazzoli, 2001, p. 294).

What if high schools took responsibility in offering *all* students the same challenges and opportunities once afforded to only the “best” students? Improving high schools especially in urban areas is of critical importance, not only for the students' futures, but also for the prosperity of the cities and for the nation as a whole. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, 10% of 14- to 17-year-olds attended high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Then, high school education was considered a luxury afforded to only those individuals with higher SES. Having a job that paid well without a diploma was the norm (“Public Education”, 2007). The 20<sup>th</sup>-century factory model of high schools has remained virtually unchanged in many cities across the United States. It was designed to efficiently push through large numbers of students, in a single building, sorting out a select few students for “higher-level thinking” courses and the rest into “basic skills” courses preparing them for manufacturing jobs. Teachers taught in isolation—50-minute classes, 150 plus students, and little time for collaboration. The classroom was like the game show *Jeopardy*—fast-paced, emphasis on correct answers, points gained for getting things correct, penalties for errors. Tinkering with the traditional high school model with piecemeal solutions is not enough to appreciably impact the outcomes for students, especially those vulnerable to difficulty during the freshman year.

However, education goals have changed from a century ago. As a result of President Bush's call for sweeping reforms in public education, the No Child Left Behind Act became law in 2001. The outline of this law includes the following:

- assessments in each state that measure student achievement in reading and math in third grade through eighth grade,
- stronger accountability for results,
- enhanced flexibility and local control,
- expanded options for parents of children from disadvantaged backgrounds,
- strengthen teacher quality,
- use of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading and math to confirm progress, and
- promotion of English proficiency (United States Department of Education, 2003).

Now, society expects high schools to prepare *all* students for success in college or the workforce requiring higher-level skills. The 21<sup>st</sup> century shows 90% of the well-paying jobs requiring some sort of post-secondary schooling (U.S. Department of Labor, 2006). Preparing the 21<sup>st</sup>-century student for their role in a new global economy has created new challenges. In a constantly changing modern workforce, students must acquire not only core subject knowledge but also adaptable, transferable skills to succeed in work and life. The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Skills (2007) cites skills that need to be infused in education:

- Learning and innovation skills-creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration

- Information, media, and technology skills
- Life and career skills-flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, and leadership and responsibility.

High school students are still placed into “out-dated, one-size-fits-all” classes. These antiquated practices demonstrate that the educational system has not caught up with changing demands and is misaligned with the modern workforce. The right design features and policy changes can promote successful high schools. At-risk students especially benefit from small schools and, unfortunately, are more likely to become alienated from the school as a result of inappropriate policies and procedures (Ainley, Frydenberg, & Russell, 2005; Raywid, 1998). Some high schools have made these changes that help students not only achieve academically but also prepare even the most challenged students for today’s world.

“If you keep doing what you’ve always done, you’ll keep getting what you’ve always gotten.” This old adage is not true for many high schools across the United States—even in the most struggling educational environments. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (2004) in *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading School Reform* outlines seven cornerstone strategies designed to give schools a place to begin making fundamental changes aimed at improving student performance and school engagement:

- Establish the essential learnings a student is required to master in order to graduate, and adjust the curriculum and teaching strategies to realize that goal.

- Increase the quantity and improve the quality of interactions between students, teachers, and other school personnel by reducing the number of students for which any adult or group of adults is responsible.
- Implement a comprehensive advisory program that ensures that each student has frequent and meaningful opportunities to plan and assess his or her academic and social progress with a faculty member.
- Ensure that teachers use a variety of instructional strategies and assessments to accommodate individual learning styles.
- Implement schedules flexible enough to accommodate teaching strategies consistent with the ways students learn most effectively and that allow for effective teacher teaming and lesson planning.
- Institute structural leadership changes that allow for meaningful involvement in decision making by students, teachers, family members, and the community and that support effective communication with these groups.
- Align the schoolwide comprehensive, ongoing professional development program and the individual Personal Learning Plans of staff members with the content knowledge and instructional strategies required to prepare students for graduation (p. 6).

Successful high school reform models have emerged in recent decades combining instructional improvements and structural changes. Interventions combining instructional and structural changes may be critical to changing the paths of students entering with low skills. These programs have improved educational outcomes and identified some of the

essential components of high school reform that relate to keeping students in school. Strategies from these well-established reform initiatives—Talent Development Model, First Things First, High Schools That Work, and High Schools for Equity—can help low-performing high schools redesign themselves. These initiatives will be discussed further in the next section.

### High School Transition Interventions

Weak academic skills of incoming high school freshman indicate the need for better curricula and a more personal environment (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). Although, the transition to high school problems are not just a reflection of what students bring with them. The ninth-grade year experience contributes significantly to the probability of dropping out despite pre-high school controls for family, academic achievement, school engagement, ambitions, and peer relationships (Neild et al., 2008). Rumberger (1995) suggests that school size directly affects dropping out, especially in schools with high proportions of low-income students. Thus, smaller schools may contribute to higher graduation rates as well as a more successful high school transition. As schools are trying to increase graduation rates, a product of No Child Left Behind, educators are focusing on the ninth grade as a period of high risk, not just academically but also socially. One study calls it “the freshman factor” (Hernandez, 2008). During their freshman year, students acknowledge falling into the “wrong crowd.” The overarching concern is that “students’ developing identities and need for group affiliation seemed to lead many to explore varying social groups, which at times led to sexual, alcohol, and drug experimentation” (Lee, 1999, p. 222-223).

Elias (2001) suggests how schools can help:

- Encourage students to recognize their personal strengths;
- Help teens make realistic academic plans;
- Encourage persistence in achieving goals despite setbacks;
- Help them plan career and postsecondary pathways;
- Give students opportunities to develop effective group participation and interpersonal skills, including negotiation and teamwork skills;
- Help them find avenues for contributing to their classrooms and schools—for example, school and community service, volunteer work, and mentorships with younger students (p. 24).

In a related study Munns and Martin (2006) state that “intervention designed to enhance students’ motivation and engagement involves improving students’ (a) approach to their schoolwork, (b) beliefs about themselves, (c) attitudes towards learning, achievement, and school, (d) study skills, and (e) reasons for learning” (p. 2-3). Both studies and others suggest that schools can provide a school climate that promotes a positive student attitude and encourages school engagement in all students (Hudley, Daoud, Hershberger, Wright-Castro, & Polanco, 2002).

In an effort to facilitate the needs of incoming freshman and to ease the transition to high school, research suggests that schools implement multiple activities. Results from the study of Hertzog and Morgan (2004) indicate that schools which implemented nine to fifteen transition practices had fewer students retained or dropping out of high school than

schools with eight or less practices. Some of the suggested transition practices by Hertzog and Morgan (1997) and others include the following:

- Provide eighth graders with guidance sessions led by a ninth-grade counselor to discuss high school curriculum, registration, and scheduling
- Hold eighth-grade “parent night” at the high school introducing parents to the high school curriculum, scheduling, and extra-curricular activities
- Organize eighth-grade field trips to the high school introducing students to the high school curriculum, scheduling, registration, and extra-curricular activities
- Organize a “transition team” consisting of middle and high school teachers who meet to plan and conduct transition activities and events or establish a “Link Crew” which involves using the upperclassmen in facilitating these activities
- Institute an advisory program designed to focus on academic achievement, study skills, and organizational skills, which could begin while students are in the eighth grade utilizing their ninth-grade advisors to begin discussion about high school life (NASSP, 2004)
- Coordinate middle and high school pen pals
- Provide eighth graders with the opportunity to shadow ninth graders or high school student visits to middle schools to talk about the high school experience
- Create a freshman orientation before the start of school
- Create a summer school study skills course where incoming ninth graders can earn high school credit (SREB, 2002)
- Encourage ninth grade teachers to review eighth graders portfolios

- Plan a “fair” to introduce students to the course offerings and extra-curricular activities
- Organize “teacher swap day” for eighth- and ninth-grade teachers
- Implement a freshman seminar course for all ninth graders focusing on organization skills, study skills, academic achievement, and social-emotional issues (Corbett & Wilson, 2000)
- Develop a ninth-grade academy (Hertzog, 2006)

Middle school to high school transition programs need to provide freshman with academic, social, emotional, and environmental support needed to successfully graduate high school.

What effective practices or programs have high schools used to address high school transition? A review of the literature on high school transition will help to understand what past and present practices and strategies have been successful. These initiatives—Talent Development, High Schools That Work, First Things First, and High Schools for Equity—provide lessons for schools which seek to better serve their at-risk student population.

In 1994, Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk initiated Talent Development which is now used in eleven states in the United States (Quint, 2008). The Talent Development Model for high schools addresses the high school transition with specific comprehensive changes for at-risk students. In this model ninth graders attend a small, separate, and personalized Success Academy and then, select one of the career academies for grades ten through twelve. Core

classes operate on a block schedule 80 to 90 minutes every day allowing teachers to cover in a semester what normally would take a year. The Success Academy is a Freshman Academy located in a separate part of the school building, fostering ninth graders sense of identity and special status. Teams of four core teachers, consisting of math, English, social studies, and science teachers, teach a common group of students and have frequent team meetings to discuss student progress. Since most students enter with weak academic skills, students take a “double-dose” of English and math. An alternative school, Twilight School, designed for students with severe disciplinary problems meets daily for three hours after the regular school day providing those students with core subjects as well as skills to manage their behavior. This is temporary and students return to regular school or go on to another alternative setting. The features of the career academies include 250-350 students in each, a school-within-a-school structure, an integrated curriculum of academic and occupational, and business partnerships. Research shows that career academies help students obtain better paying jobs working more hours—benefiting mostly boys who started the program with medium to high risk of dropping out of high school and stemming from the job knowledge and work-based learning experiences gained (Quint, 2008). The essential components of the model include “(1) a college preparatory core curriculum based on high standards, and (2) a learning environment that incorporates four sources of student motivation: relevance of schoolwork, a caring and supportive human environment, opportunities for academic success, and help with personal problems” (LaPoint, Jordan, McPartland, & Towns, 1996, p. iii).

As a pilot in 1988, the SREB began High Schools That Work and in 2003 was being implemented in over 1,000 high schools (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004). It is designed to raise academic achievement of career-bound students by combining traditional college-preparatory courses with vocational courses. It operates on the premise that “(1) an intellectually challenging curriculum should be taught to all high school students, and (2) students understand and retain academic concepts more readily if they use them in completing projects for their vocational courses (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004, p. 209). High Schools That Work suggests several strategies for effective high school transition:

- Implement an interdisciplinary approach to accelerate low-achieving middle school students.
- Conduct summer school for middle school students to get a jump start on their ninth-grade year and prevent learning loss.
- Conduct a summer program for incoming ninth graders who are below grade-level performance.
- Form teacher support teams.
- Develop academies and small learning communities.
- Offer double dosing of mathematics and English.
- Establish programs to get students ready for high school and after high school.

(SREB, 2002)

High Schools That Work sets high standards with a recommended curriculum assessing student performance benchmarked to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

In 1996, the Institute for Research and Reform in Education implemented First Things First; and in 2007, 27 high schools had adopted the model (Quint, 2008). This model's main components consist of (a) small learning communities of 200-300 students who take all core subjects together for all four years of high school, (b) personalized student advisory program (family advocate system), and (c) staff development aimed at instructional improvements. The small learning communities consist of students from all grade levels who share common occupational or other interests. There is some evidence from the student surveys that indicates "participating in smaller peer groups helped students feel known and cared for by their teachers" (Quint, 2008, p. 65). Their advisories consist of a teacher and 12 to 17 students in the same learning community who meet regularly for individual "check-ins" and who conference jointly with parents and student twice a year. Quint (2008) reports that a majority of students feel comfortable talking to their advisor (family advocate) and a majority of the advisors believe they helped students succeed academically and other ways. Faculty advisor training is necessary to support students effectively. Researchers of this model show that students who feel supported by their teachers are more likely to be engaged in school than other students who do not have that support (Klem & Connell, 2004).

High Schools for Equity is a report from The School Redesign Network at Stanford University based on intensive case studies of five urban high schools in

California serving populations of predominantly low-performing students of color (Friedlaender & Darling-Hammond, 2007). They are all small schools ranging from 300 to 500 students. All of these high schools share this common belief:

These schools offer an educational *experience* that engages students in intellectually stimulating, socially and practically relevant, and personalized learning that empowers them to contribute to their communities and to learn throughout their lives. These students take ownership of their education and develop a stake in their own learning that enables them to negotiate obstacles and take charge of their lives (Friedlaender & Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. vi).

They share some common design features:

- Personalization (e.g., small learning environments, advisory systems, teaming, small class sizes, block scheduling)
- Rigorous and relevant instruction (e.g., college-preparatory curriculum; connections to careers, community, and college; culturally relevant curriculum; project-based learning; extra academic supports)
- Professional collaboration and learning (e.g., summer retreats, regular professional development, weekly teacher collaboration)

As a result the graduation rates of these five schools in 2006 ranged from 87% to 99%.

Between 80% and 100% of the graduates go on to postsecondary education (Friedlaender & Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Common elements are shared across all models in these key areas: creating a sense of belonging, providing support to ninth grade students with academic deficiencies, improving instruction, preparing students for success beyond high school, and stimulating lasting change (Quint, 2008). Similarly, a study by the Rennie Center for Education

Research and Policy (2009) examined eleven high schools in Massachusetts with targeted interventions addressing the risk factors of dropping out and helping students engage in school and graduate. Consistent with the key areas previously mentioned, it referenced the most commonly named interventions: personalization and building a sense of community (e.g., smaller learning environments, mentorships or advisories); academic supports (e.g., extra help and curriculum adjustments, credit recovery, more time for academics); wrap-around services (i.e., support for social-emotional and psychological issues); advisory programs for special populations (i.e., customized to meet the diverse needs of individual subgroups); and support for the transition to ninth grade (e.g., freshman academies, double all services for freshman, summer program for incoming freshman). Consistently reported, any reform initiative needs to provide special support to at-risk ninth-grade students.

### *Freshman Academy*

The Freshman Academy program is one such ninth-grade transition approach being implemented. “By implementing the academy concept, schools provide the transitioning students an opportunity to adjust to the new facility, acquire the skills to succeed in a competitive educational environment, and enjoy a feeling of security similar to what they experienced in middle school” (Hertzog, 2006, p. 61). This transition program encompasses diverse school demographics, from rural to urban schools, and in size of implementation, from just at-risk students to entire ninth grade populations. Students are labeled at-risk if in jeopardy of failing to obtain a high school diploma due to poor academic performance and histories of disciplinary and/or attendance problems

(SREB, 2002). Some include in this definition socio-economic status, ethnicity, or gender (Reyes & Jason, 1991). The Freshman Academy program is a place, “where students who were identified as at-risk for failure could receive instruction in study skills and strategies for organization” (Fulk, 2003, p. 8). In some high schools, like Dudley High School, in Greensboro, North Carolina, the Freshman Academy has expanded to include all ninth-grade students (Chmelynski, 2004).

Schools are trying to create a community of learners among the teachers and students in the Freshman Academy through adapting school structures (e.g., school-within-a-school, flexible scheduling, teaming) and more learner-centered approaches (e.g., cooperative learning, differentiated instruction). The Freshman Academies differ in their structure. Some classrooms are situated in close proximity and others are isolated in a separate building. Students are assigned to an interdisciplinary team for four hours of blocked classes. Teachers have a common planning period to collaborate about the academic progress of their ninth graders and about specific student needs as well as to design lessons and strategies to address those needs. Students are moved through the educational system with minimal regard to the needs of the individual. The practice of ignoring student needs perpetuates their failure. Kerri Kerr, educational policy specialist at RAND Corp, points out, “Large scale, expensive changes won’t work unless schools add an essential ingredient—the unique characteristic and needs of ninth-grade students” (Black, 2004, p. 44).

## Needs of At-Risk Students

There are a number of highly at-risk students in most urban high schools. These students may never have had any positive reinforcement from their school. They may have been retained at least once, lack confidence in their cognitive abilities, suffer low motivation and self-esteem, and have conceded the battle to excel in school. Instead of receiving support, trust, and challenge from their teachers and classmates, these students are often ostracized, ridiculed, pitied, or feared (LaPoint et al., 1996, p. 31).

“Every child can learn. That so many students fail to attain necessary skills reflects not the incapacity of the students but the incapacity of schools to meet the needs of every child” (Slavin & Madden, 1989, p. 4). Students who come to school sick, hungry, tired, depressed, or preoccupied with family or social issues cannot fully engage in learning.

Some people think this is just about the academics, but it’s not.... We’ve fed kids who’ve come to school hungry. We’re dealing with the whole person. There are human issues—emotional, mental, physical. We have to deal with those first and convince the students that we care (Holland, Mazzoli, 2001, p. 295).

The needs of the adolescent learner must be examined when exploring school engagement, especially as it relates to ninth graders.

Using Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” as a theoretical framework, the Freshman Academy must first define the needs of the students in order to address them. Slavin (1989) states six common denominators of students at risk educationally:

- Low academic achievement
- Retention at grade level
- Poor attendance
- Low self-esteem

- Negative attitudes toward school
- High dropout rates from school

In an effort to understand what events and interactions engage high school students, Clarke and Frazer (2003) discovered six developmental needs that high school students have:

- Voice (the need to express their personal perspective)
- Belonging (the need to create individual and group identities)
- Choice (the need to examine options and choose a path)
- Freedom (the need to take risks and assess effects)
- Imagination (the need to create a projected view of self)
- Success (the need to demonstrate mastery) (as cited in NASSP, 2004, p. 70).

Research by Strong, Silver, and Robinson (1995) suggested that students who are engaged are driven by four essential goals, each satisfying a particular human need:

- Success (the need for mastery)
- Curiosity (the need for understanding)
- Originality (the need for self-expression)
- Relationships (the need for involvement with others) (p. 9)

In meeting those needs,

Maslow prioritized human needs believing that the most basic needs, at the bottom of the hierarchy, must be satisfied before the next level can be addressed. Needs occupying a higher level of the hierarchy become motivators of behavior when needs at lower levels of the hierarchy have been satisfied (Maslow, 1987, as cited in Watts, 2000, p. 5)

Maslow's motivational needs fall into five categories ascending from basic to complex: physiological needs (e.g., food, water, sleep), safety needs (e.g., protection, security), social needs (e.g., love, sense of belonging), esteem needs (e.g., achievement, competence, recognition, approval), and self-actualization (e.g., creativity, curiosity, desire for knowledge). In the middle of the hierarchy, social factors, involving feelings of love, affection, and a sense of belonging, drive humans into relationships. The human desire is to satisfy these needs. "All these basic needs may be considered to be simply steps along the path to general self-actualization [defined as ongoing actualization of potential, capacities, and talents (p. 31)], under which all basic needs can be subsumed" (Maslow, 1999, p.169). Meeting the needs—social, emotional, and academic—of ninth-grade students impacts several educational outcomes as measured by their attendance, academic achievement, and school engagement.

#### *Social Needs, Accommodations, and Educational Outcomes*

One essential need of ninth-grade students is meaningful relationships. In the ninth grade, the typical student-teacher relationship is weak as a result of the fragmented organization of the school structure by content areas (Marshall, 2003). In a traditional program students have six or seven class periods, switching classes every 50 minutes, with six or seven different teachers. For the student in transition, connection with a caring adult at school is needed. At-risk students claim their lack of school success is because they felt no connection with their school and questioned whether any staff member took a personal interest in them. "Dropout students report that the one factor which might have prevented them leaving school early was the feeling that there was one adult in the school

who knew them well and cared for them” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998, p. 32). Lee (1999) cited that students shared a positive schooling experience with teachers who displayed concern about them academically, personally, and socially. “Social support is related to performance in achievement situations and is a critical aspect of classroom life” (Marshall, 2003, p. 17).

The Freshman Academy program utilizes an interdisciplinary team approach that provides students with a support group in which teachers can connect with them on a regular basis to identify their needs and help them learn. Interdisciplinary teams, also known as teacher teaming, organize teachers from different subject areas into groups of varying numbers with an assigned common area of the school plant, a common schedule, and responsibility for a common group of students (Hecht et al., 1995).

Teaming is one step toward decreasing the failure rate, increasing standardized test scores, and thus increasing the graduation rate. A study examining interdisciplinary teams with ninth graders showed that program participants have a lower failure rate, higher overall GPA, higher course grades, and higher standardized test scores than those students who did not participate in the teaming approach (Fulk, 2003). Teaming also contributes to building a sense of community. Students felt that this contributed to a decrease in peer and teacher conflicts and an increase in motivation and engagement in learning experiences (Lokon, 1997). It helps nurture the relationship and provide students more support (Colvin, 2008). Teachers using the teaming approach cited familiarity with each student and their individual needs as contributing to the improved academic achievement (Hecht et al., 1995).

*Emotional Needs, Accommodations, and Educational Outcomes*

“Dealing with physical changes, striving for independence from family, and acquiring new methods of intellectual functioning are all emotional issues for emerging adolescents” (Letrello & Miles, 2003, p. 212). Studies by Fine (1991) and Nieto (1992) have noted that students experiencing academic problems often feel alienated from schools— usually structured to foster little student participation and involvement (as cited in Lee, 1999). The National Center for Education Statistics (1992) reported 20% of ninth-grade students experienced an increase in feelings of isolation (as cited in Chapman & Sawyer, 2001). Also, at this time of transition in their life, as revealed by Hertzog, Morgan, Diamond, and Walker (1996) and Mac Iver (1990), students have a lower self-esteem, lack of motivation to learn, and an increased need to have friends (as cited in Letrello & Miles, 2003). “Teens are looking for places where they have a role or a purpose; where they can find positive peer relationships with others who have similar interests or abilities; and where they can learn things” (Elias, 2001, p. 22). They desire to feel comfortable, safe, and accepted. All the changes in a large, often alienating high school can be overwhelming. Because of the flexibility a smaller learning environment like the Freshman Academy provides, school staff are able to help students overcome school adjustment issues and instill a sense of belonging.

The Freshman Academy establishes a school-within-a-school. School-within-a-school utilizes rooms in close proximity and common teachers. The structural reorganization of large urban high schools for ninth-grade students to a school-within-a-school reduces the amount of change students encounter, establishes teacher and peer

support, and creates a space where they are less likely to be harassed by upperclassmen. Also, it enhances students' sense of belonging and reduces the complexity of the school environment (Reyes & Jason, 1991). "Anecdotal evidence suggests that students in the Ninth Grade Success Academies feel close to their teachers and to one another" (Quint, 2008, p. 65). Felner, Ginter, and Primavera (1982) showed that such programs result in improvement not only in the students' academic achievement, but also in their self-esteem and perception of the school environment (as cited in Reyes & Jason, 1991). A successful student will have a more positive attitude toward school.

Recent movement toward "personalizing the school environment" and "small learning communities" is growing among educators and has potential to improve relationships and student engagement (NASSP, 2004; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004; Raywid, 1998). Also, research supports that small class size is a contributing factor in the success of at-risk students. Teachers interviewed in Peterson, Bennet, and Sherman (1991) found "smaller class sizes allow teachers to provide at-risk students with more attention and recognition" (as cited in Watts, 2000, p.7). Large classes present difficulties for a teacher to monitor and to provide the support needed to each student. Students interviewed in Castleberry and Enger (1998) reported "one-on-one instruction, ability to concentrate, and an opportunity to be known by teachers as benefits of small classes" (as cited in Watts, 2000, p.7). The personalized environment and close supervision are benefits of a small class size. The NASSP and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching report that the smaller learning environment creates happier, safer, higher achieving students (Oxley, 2001).

### *Academic Needs, Accommodations, and Educational Outcomes*

The National Center for Education Statistics (1992) reported 75% of students felt that the ninth grade was increasingly more difficult academically than middle school (as cited in Chapman & Sawyer, 2001). Teachers need to uncover their students' hidden talents or interests. Howard Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligences refers to the range of talents students possess and suggests that their sense of identity is strengthened when they have positive outlets in which to develop and express them. The students need to feel appreciated and have accomplishments celebrated to motivate them academically.

Another important aspect of the Freshman Academy is the flexible scheduling. One such type of scheduling, block scheduling, restructures the school day into classes lasting 90 minutes, rather than the traditional 50-minute period classes. At-risk students, in particular, need more hands-on experiences and real-life activities to interest and motivate them. The Oregon Department of Education (1996) found that the use of block scheduling allowed for this type of learning, attempting to meet the needs of at-risk students (as cited in Gruber & Onwuegbuzie, 2001). The percentage of ninth-grade students on a block schedule who passed their courses, earned credits towards graduation, and passed state graduation tests was higher than the students not on a block schedule the previous year (SREB, 2002). Results of using "double-dosing" and "double-blocking" show that ninth- grade students in the Talent Development Model schools were more likely to earn English and math credits and to be promoted to sophomore status on time than those ninth graders in school without this model (Quint, 2008). Students claimed the following benefits occurred more often in block classes than traditional periods:

- Teachers did a good job of explaining content and assignments.
- Teachers used a variety of activities and ways of organizing students to work.
- Teachers established relationships with students.
- Students understood the work they were doing.
- Students were able to finish their work.
- Students were able to keep track of their assignments and retain what they were learning (Corbett & Wilson, 2000 p. 24-25).

Other benefits of the block schedule include fewer class preparations for students and fewer sets of class rules for them to abide by (Gruber & Onwuegbuzie, 2001). Some disadvantages have also been noted; missing a class on a block schedule is equivalent to missing two days on a period schedule (Gruber & Onwuegbuzie, 2001). Students missing multiple days find it difficult to make up work and grasp missed concepts. Nevertheless, research supports the results that students learning on a block schedule have greater academic achievement than those who are not (Gruber & Onwuegbuzie, 2001).

A final key component to the Freshman Academy is an intervention or seminar period within the school day for students, where students learn how to learn or gain extra support. These interventions typically include learning styles, study skills, test-taking strategies, organizational skills, time-management, and computer research skills, as well as, addressing social and emotional issues. The Freshman Seminar course in the Success Academy of Talent Development high schools is designed to ensure that all freshmen:

- Know about credits, high school graduation requirements, and the courses they need to take to enter a two-year or four-year college or university.

- Learn the study skills they will need to succeed academically in high school and beyond.
- Develop the social skills they will need to be effective learners in school and other arenas.
- Learn important life skills such as goal setting, decision-making, and effective communication and apply these to the challenges and responsibilities of early adulthood.
- Develop a strong awareness of college and postsecondary options and an understanding of the steps they need to prepare for and finance their education beyond high school.
- Explore career interests and learn about educational requirements and jobseeking processes for different jobs in preferred career clusters (Morrison & Legters, 1998, as cited in Corbett & Wilson, 2000, p. 29).

Student interviews with freshman having taken a seminar class to help them with the high school transition expressed appreciation that the course provided them with basic skills in organization, note taking, and study strategies which could be used with all subjects, as well as thinking about their futures (Corbett & Wilson, 2000). Additionally, affective interventions should help increase the students' motivation and self-esteem. Numerous researchers have found that effective study skills are related to academic success (Fulk, 2003).

## Measures of School Success

Over the past decade, Freshman Academies have been implemented across the country to address the unique problems, which face ninth-grade students. Implementation of these programs spans all demographics from rural to urban high schools. Data from high school reform projects that involve Freshman Academies suggest a positive impact on educational outcomes. “Robert Marzano (2003) concluded not only that schools have a significant impact upon student achievement, but also that ‘schools that are highly effective produce results that almost entirely overcome the effects of student backgrounds’” (as cited in DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004, p. 20). Following are some of the results from existing research that show school success as measured by engagement, attendance, behavior, and academic achievement in various high schools.

Scott County High School, in rural Georgetown, Kentucky, each year has roughly 450 ninth-grade students. From 1995-1996, the year prior to implementation, compared to 2000-2001, the attendance rate rose from 89% to 93%. The number of ninth-grade failures dropped from 17% to 6% during the same time. Also, the discipline referrals from ninth-grade students decreased significantly by 54% (SREB, 2002). Housed in their own building, these students have their own space, more focused attention, recognition, and the encouragement they need.

Houston County High School, in Georgia, has a suburban student population of 2,200. Before starting the Freshman Academy, the school was plagued with referrals, 60% for freshman alone. They have reported a decrease of 55% in discipline referrals. Also, they showed a decrease of 46% in grade retentions over the past six years since the

program began (Chmelynski, 2004). Now, the ninth-grade students are housed in a separate building instead of just a separate area of the high school with hopes of even more success.

The Philadelphia School System in Pennsylvania, as part of the Talent Development initiative, developed at Johns Hopkins University, has had success with their Freshman Academies. At their first two sites, promotion rates for age-appropriate freshman increased by 47% at one school and 65% at another (Philadelphia Education Fund, 2000, as cited in Neild et al., 2008). They saw a decrease of 41% in suspensions (Chmelynski, 2004). Attendance rates rose by 15%. Ninth-grade math and reading ability levels rose by one to two years (Black, 2004). Evidence suggests that students in the Freshman Academies feel close to their teachers and to one another (Quint, 2008). Now, all 54 high schools in Philadelphia have Freshman Academies.

Muhlenberg South High School in rural Greenville, Kentucky has approximately 700 students of which about 200 are ninth graders. Their demographics are 94% white, 6% minority, and 46% free and reduced lunch (Clark & Hunley, 2007). In 2001 Muhlenberg South established a Freshman Academy to address the freshman issues of discontentment with school, absenteeism, discipline problems, declining test scores, and overall negative attitude toward school. Students take their four core classes in one wing of the school. Each are 42 minutes in length while the rest of the school operates on 90-minute blocks so while the freshmen switch classes the upperclassmen are not in the hallway. The school reports that the shortened periods and modified passing time decreases classroom disruptions, increases attentiveness, and in turn, increases time on

task. While in their core classes, students experience the middle school concept, but they also are given time to get accustomed to high school. The two elective classes are on the block schedule with the rest of the school. As a result, the school feels it “eases the transition by giving students a familiar setting while gradually introducing the responsibilities associated with high school” (Clark & Hunley, 2007, p. 45). The academy also has special programs for the freshman. The school’s Family Resource Center has developed activities with an emphasis on encouraging, empowering, and giving a sense of belonging to at-risk students. Quarterly “Reward Days” are held for those students who meet the attendance and discipline requirements set by the academy. In its first six years of existence, Muhlenberg South has seen measures of success:

- Improved attendance
- Improved behavior (e.g. first quarter of the 2004-2005 school year 14% of the total discipline infractions were Freshman Academy students)
- Increased academic success (e.g. 2003-2004 school year the math computations scores of the basic skills test showed an increase of 19 percentile points from 33<sup>rd</sup> to 52<sup>nd</sup> percentile) (Clark & Hunley, 2007).

Teachers in the building report a positive difference in the Freshman Academy students and see a distinct difference in their academic abilities.

In the 2007-2008 school year, Prince George’s County, Maryland, found that 75% of their freshman passed ninth grade. To pass they have to earn five credits and pass a reading course. One of the schools, Suitland High School, had 70% passing. In the county only half of the incoming freshman had shown proficiency on the statewide eighth-grade

reading test and only 35% in math (Hernandez, 2008). In 2004, Suitland High School implemented a freshman academy for their entire ninth grade housed in an annex near the main building, “ninth graders make the transition from the more-controlled environment of middle school to the *relative* freedom of high school” (Hernandez, 2008, p. 2). A major part of their freshman academy is building relationships. All freshmen have an advisory class that meets once or twice a week—providing a forum for discussing problems and giving students lessons in life skills, such as conflict management, college and test preparation, or resolving personal issues. Also, there are special classes to assist students with deficiencies in their reading and math skills. Suitland High’s measures of success are more qualitative. For them success looked like...

- a grammar class in a temporary classroom, where students dissected parts of a sentence with surgical precision,
- the young man wearing a Suitland Rams football jersey in the back of a physics class, snapping off correct answers about Newton’s second law of motion,
- the young girl in honors algebra with a perfectly completed assignment which hangs on the classroom wall. She wants to study computer science... “I just want to be able to help people out with their computer issues,” and
- a 14-year-old boy wanting his own fashion label... “It’s not an option to drop out for me...If I drop out of school, what am I going to do? You might as well stay in school and go to college. You’ll be better off in life” (Hernandez, 2008, p. 2).

In 2007, Ascension Parish public schools in Louisiana implemented Freshman Academies in its four high schools. They have seen some success in their first year:

- Nearly 10% fewer freshman failed one or more classes than the previous year.
- Moderate improvement in areas of tenth grade promotion, dropout rates, and scores on the state's iLEAP exams
- Attendance and frequency of disciplinary actions saw no change (Colvin, 2008).

There was more than academic success. Students made connections with teachers and felt like an adult cared. As the director of secondary education said, "There are kids that would not have stayed in school without the academies. Even if we save only a handful, it is worth our effort" (Colvin, 2008).

In summary, the ninth-grade students involved in the Freshman Academies benefited from the program. The educational outcomes of each of these schools show improvement over their traditional ninth-grade programs before implementing the Freshman Academy. These schools' Freshman Academies exhibit higher test scores, higher rates of attendance, fewer failures, and fewer discipline problems as these studies show. Most importantly the students came away from their freshman year with a feeling of success.

Engagement in learning is both an end in itself and a means to an end. For the above outcomes to be achieved students need to engage actively with schooling. Such engagement will lead to higher quality educational achievements, and these in turn will prepare the way for a dynamic process of engagement, learning and achievement throughout life (Ainley et al., 2005).

## Conceptual Framework: Social Cognitive Theory

The business of education is about learning and achievement for each student. We believe that without these personal connections and our understanding of the motivations, aspirations, and learning styles of students, most students will never become engaged in their own learning and never really achieve their potential (NASSP, 2004, p. 4).

How do individual's behaviors, experiences, and environment affect how they learn? Alfred Bandura's social cognitive theory, historically used interchangeably with the social learning theory, examines the bidirectional, influential interrelationship of a person's behavior, cognition and personal beliefs, and the environment (Bandura, 1977; 1989). This theory can be visualized as a triangle with each vertex representing one of the factors: behavior, cognitive and other personal factors, and the external environment (Figure 2). Social cognitive theory provides a theoretical framework for learning. The learner gains knowledge as his or her environment comes together with personal characteristics and personal experiences. The social cognitive theory contends that behavior is mostly regulated through cognitive processes (Bandura, 1986; 1989). Bandura (1989) argues that cognitive factors partially decide what events in the environment will be observed, what meaning will be given to them, whether any lasting effect remains, what emotional impact and motivating power they possess, and how the information they bear will be sorted for future use.

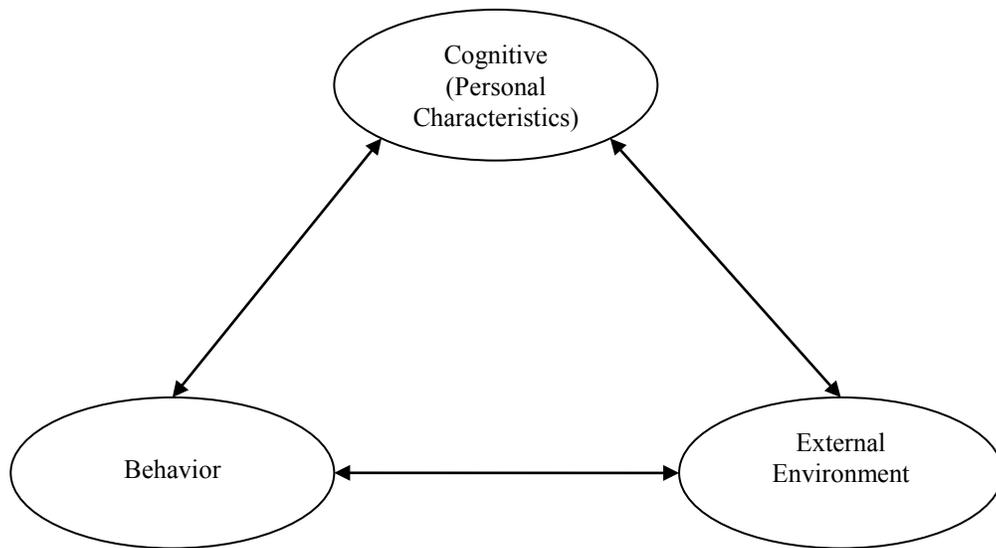


Figure 2. Triadic reciprocal determinism.  
Bandura's model of causation on which social cognitive theory is founded.

“In the social cognitive theory, people are neither driven by inner forces nor automatically shaped and controlled by the environment... They function as contributors to their own motivation, behavior, and development within a network of reciprocally interacting influences” (Bandura, 1989, p. 6). It is these five basic capabilities which provide humans the cognitive means by which to determine behavior (Bandura, 1989):

- Symbolizing Capability: Verbal, pictorial, and other symbols provide humans a means in which to understand and manage their environment. Mental pictures or words give meaning to individuals' experiences allowing it to be stored in their memory for future use.
- Vicarious Capability: Learning is expedited when individuals are able to observe the behaviors of others without actually performing the behavior oneself.

Knowledge and skills can be acquired by a) direct experience—learning through the effects of one's actions and b) observational learning (also called modeling

and imitation)—behavioral adoption which occurs by watching the actions and outcomes of others' behavior (Bandura, 1989). Observational learning is managed by four processes: (a) attentional span, individuals' ability to carefully observe actions and behaviors in their environment and discern the information that has been extracted from the observations; (b) retention processes, individuals' ability to form symbols from observed behavior saved in one's memory; (c) motor reproduction processes, individuals converting their newly acquired knowledge into practice; and (d) motivational processes (Bandura, 1977; 1986; 1989).

- **Forethought Capability:** Defined as an individual's capability to motivate themselves and guide their actions anticipatorily (Bandura, 1989). Most purposive human behavior is regulated by forethought. Through cognitive processes, foreseeable future events are converted into current motivators and regulators of behavior to produce desired outcomes (Bandura, 1989). Rooted in symbolic activity, forethought is translated into incentives and purposive action through the aid of self-regulatory mechanisms (Bandura, 1989).
- **Self-regulatory Capability:** An individual's internal control over his or her behavior and self-imposed consequences for that behavior. Bandura (1989) states, "Psychological functioning is, therefore, regulated by an interplay of self-produced and external sources of influence" (p. 32-33). Important factors in the social cognitive perspective include motivation to perform a behavior and feedback from the environment. Individuals function as active agents in their own motivation. Motivational standards act as a guide for behavior through goal

setting and goal attainment. Motivational effects stem from self-regulatory behaviors (Bandura, 1989) (a) self-efficacy: personal judgments about one's own capability to perform a particular behavior, (b) self-evaluation: "People seek self-satisfactions from fulfilling valued goals and are prompted to intensify their efforts by discontent with substandard performances" (p. 33), and (c) self-influence: readjustment of personal standards to keep within attainable bounds. After an individual attains the standard being pursued, the person sets higher standards. Also, social and moral standards regulate behavior through the exercise of moral agency.

- Self-reflective Capability: Individuals analyze their experiences, reflect on their thought processes, and make changes in their thinking where needed. Bandura (1989) states, "Among the types of thoughts that affect action, none is more central or pervasive than people's own judgments of their capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives" (p. 42). Vital in self-reflection, self-efficacy is developed as individuals are able to reflect upon and internalize their own successes and failures and is achieved when the individuals identify their ability to perform a behavior (Bandura, 1989).

Bandura's writings on the social cognitive theory can be used to explain the impact of the freshman academy on attendance, achievement, and school engagement. Bandura reminds us of the importance of cognitive processes (thinking, creating, analyzing, evaluating, reflecting) in the actions of individuals. The ability of the learner to sort, store, and transfer experiences through the use of symbols and to project thoughts

into the future are essential contributors to learning. “Educational practices should be gauged not only by the skills and knowledge they impart for present use, but also by what they do to children’s beliefs about their capabilities, which affects how they approach the future” (Bandura, 1989, p. 47).

### School Engagement

Bandura’s social cognitive theory provides one theoretical approach to school engagement. In the social cognitive view, “people are neither driven by inner forces nor buffeted by environmental stimuli. Rather, psychological functioning is explained in terms of a continually reciprocal interaction of personal and environmental determinants” (Bandura, 1977, p. 11-12). These five capabilities—symbolizing, vicarious, forethought, self-regulatory, and self-reflective— explain all expressions of school engagement.

The construct of school engagement is drawn from several related literatures, including research on motivation, self-regulated learning, and school climate. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) synthesized the extensive literature on school engagement placing it into a theoretical framework involving three domains: behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement. The multifaceted construct of engagement is defined in three ways. Behavioral engagement is related to participation in both academic and social activities, including extra-curricular activities. Cognitive engagement involves student investment in learning. Emotional engagement involves positive and negative reactions to teachers, other students, the curriculum, and the school. Also, it includes having a sense of belonging and valuing learning and the goals of

schooling. For purposes of this study, this model presented by Fredricks et al. (2004) will provide the structural base for the examination of school engagement.

Researchers regard engagement as a critical factor in student success (Audas & Williams, 2001; Finn, 1989; Fredricks et al., 2004; Marks, 2000). If students are to be motivated to learn, they must be engaged in the learning environment.

Children who are engaged show sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by positive emotional tone. They select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; they show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest (Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p. 572).

Thus, it is helpful to think about the three components as a triad since “In reality these factors are dynamically interrelated within the individual; they are not isolated processes” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 61). Looking at engagement as a multidimensional construct and as an interaction between person and environment, we can more fully understand the depth of students’ school experiences and better design interventions to meet their needs. “Currently, many interventions, such as improving school climate or changing curriculum and standards, explicitly or implicitly focus on engagement as a route to increased learning or decreased dropping out” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 61). Commonalities exist among those schools successfully engaging students: teachers set high standards and provide meaningful instruction and support services are offered (Klem & Connell, 2004). Therefore, research on engagement is essential to understanding some of the challenges facing high school reform.

### *Behavioral Engagement*

Behavioral engagement involves three types of school participation:

- a) Conduct—attending school regularly, punctuality, following school rules, refraining from disruptive behaviors, completing homework, on task behaviors in the classroom (Finn, 1993; Finn et al., 1995; Finn & Rock 1997; Fredricks et al., 2004).
- b) Involvement in learning and academic tasks—taking initiative in the classroom, effort (doing the work), persistence, concentration, attention, asking questions, contributing to class discussion (Finn, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Voelkl, 1997).
- c) Participation in school related activities—clubs, athletics, student government (Finn, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004).

Attendance has been demonstrated to have a positive influence on academic achievement and behavioral engagement. In Ohio schools, Roby (2004) examined the relationship between achievement, as measured by the Ohio Proficiency Tests, and attendance. Findings suggest (a) there is a relationship between student achievement and attendance, especially among ninth-grade students; (b) there is a significant difference between the achievement levels at grades four, six, and nine; and (c) not only are the averages on the proficiency tests higher, but also yearly attendance averages of students in those schools that show higher test scores. In contrast, student nonattendance prevents a student from being exposed to learning opportunities and grade promotion (Finn, 1993).

Furthermore, absenteeism has been associated with disruptive behavior in the classroom and to juvenile delinquency (Finn, 1993). Finn and Rock (1997) identified personal characteristics as contributors to behavioral engagement which include dependability, personal discipline, and positive work habits. Behaviorally engaged students attended class, arrived to school on time, and avoided disruptive behavior in class (Finn & Rock, 1997). However, students who are not compliant in the classroom are more likely to experience learning challenges and are more susceptible to severe behavior issues in following years. Similarly, Finn (1993) argued that students who had weak connections to school engage in deviant behavior. Students who do not actively participate in school starting in the early years and who do not develop a sense of identification with school are at risk for disruptive behavior in class, absenteeism, truancy, juvenile delinquency, and dropping out of school (Finn, 1989; Voelkl, 1997). Therefore, educators should make attempts in providing positive reinforcement for acceptable behaviors (Finn, 1993).

Indeed, when students are behaviorally engaged they do better in the classroom. Another component of behavioral engagement is participation in learning and academic tasks (Finn, 1993). Finn (1993) contends that students with high levels of participation have higher academic scores. Voelkl (1997) and others describe these participatory behaviors of engaged students as attending class and school; paying attention to their teacher; actively participating in learning activities by asking questions, dialoging with their teachers, contributing to class discussion, and completing assignments; taking school seriously; and wanting to do well academically (Finn, 1993; Skinner & Belmont,

1993; Voelkl, 1997; Marks, 2000; Libbey, 2004; Fredricks et al., 2004). These behaviors influence students' learning and academic success. Students with high academic achievement and active participation in the learning process are more likely to identify with school (Voelkl, 1997). Finn (1993) argues that nonparticipatory behaviors such as failing to take advantage of constructive learning strategies and engaging in negative behaviors impede learning. Thus, academic achievement and school engagement suffer as a result. Students who have experienced school failure repeatedly and do not actively participate in the classroom are less likely to identify with school and will potentially drop out of school (Voelkl, 1997). Finn's research on school engagement found that at-risk students who are more behaviorally engaged in school are more often academically successful, regardless of the fact that they were considered at risk for school failure based on their socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Finn, 1993; Finn & Rock, 1997).

Behavioral engagement extends beyond participation in the classroom to participation in school related activities—clubs, athletics, and other extracurricular activities. Students participating in extracurricular activities have higher academic achievement than those that do not (Finn, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004; Libbey, 2004; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Also, students who are more involved in school-related activities have been found to have stronger and more positive relationships with their school and teachers (Alexander, Enwisle, & Horsey, 1997), are more deeply invested in their school, and experience a greater sense of belonging (Finn, 1993), leading to higher school engagement than students who do not participate in extracurricular activities. The idea that extracurricular participation is a critical factor to building school

engagement is supported by research involving at-risk students. Mahoney and Cairns (1997) report that extracurricular activities can help at-risk students to be more successful in school. They indicate that extracurricular participation provides students an opportunity to create a positive and voluntary connection to their school and is linked to decreasing early school dropouts in both genders. Results of Finn (1993) show a strong correlation between the participation in classroom activities and in school and academic achievement.

### *Cognitive Engagement*

Cognitive engagement integrates motivation, effort (learning and mastering the material), and strategy use. The construct is defined by two different literatures—the learning literature and the motivational literature. The literature on learning and instruction defines cognitive engagement in terms of self-efficacy, self-regulation, and strategic approach to learning (Bandura, 1989; Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003; Fredricks et al., 2004). The motivational literature focuses on the psychological investment in learning—motivation to learn, learning goals, and intrinsic motivation (Ames, 1992; Brophy, 1987; Fredricks et al., 2004; Harter, 1996).

An important element in remaining engaged in school is self-efficacy, belief in one's efficacy to perform learning tasks (Bandura, 1989; Hudley et al., 2002). In general terms self-efficacy provides a sense of competence across many domains and areas of expertise (Caraway et al., 2003). Part of cognitive engagement includes goal orientation, one's inclination to set goals and make plans for oneself (Bandura, 1977; 1986; Caraway et al., 2003). Caraway et al. (2003) shows that a student's goal orientation and academic

achievement influence cognitive engagement. Students' perception of themselves as efficacious increases a student's "willingness to set further goals, put forth more effort to achieve these goals, and persevere when challenges arise" (p. 423). Thus, with goal achievement, self-efficacy is improved (Caraway et al., 2003).

Beliefs in self-efficacy influence one's self-regulative behaviors (Bandura, 1989). Cognitive engagement can be regarded as self-regulating or being strategic (Fredricks et al., 2004). Zimmerman (1990) suggests that self-regulated learners possess metacognitive processes which include planning, setting goals, organizing, self-monitoring, and self-evaluating at various points during the process of learning acquisition. In addition, self-regulated students' approach to learning opportunities is with confidence, diligence, and resourcefulness. Most importantly, self-regulated learners assume responsibility and control for their own knowledge and skill attainment and are acutely aware of what they know and skills they possess and what they do not. Strategic students implement various strategies when learning situations are perceived as challenging: problem-solving, use of effort, higher level thinking skills, information-seeking, and experimentation (Klem & Connell, 2004) as well as record keeping; environmental structuring; giving self-consequences; rehearsing and memorizing; seeking social assistance from peers, teachers, or other adults; and reviewing of notes, books, or tests (Zimmerman, 1990). Learners who use these meaningful strategies and who create more meaningful connection to what they are learning will be more cognitively engaged than those who do not (Fredricks et al., 2004). Also, "students' use of these self-regulated learning strategies was strongly associated with superior academic functioning" (Zimmerman, 1990, p. 8). Self-regulated

students seek out opportunities to learn instead of just being reactive to their learning outcomes.

Cognitive engagement refers to investment in learning— motivation to learn, learning goals, and intrinsic motivation (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988; Brophy, 1987). Cognitive engagement is evidenced by the effort to learn and master skills. Ames (1992) suggests there are two central goals to the process of motivation: mastery goals and performance goals. A mastery goal focuses on a student's effort and outcome working hand in hand. Ames and Archer (1988) found that students, who are mastery goal oriented, reported using meaningful learning strategies, liking their classes, and believing that effort leads to success. Whereas, a performance goal focuses on a student's sense of worth and ability (Ames, 1992). Students who are performance goal oriented use basic learning strategies like rote memorization and believe achievement and competition work jointly. The challenge is for teachers to develop strategies to improve students' mastery goal behaviors.

Research suggests that motivation to learn can be viewed as a general trait that describes the intrinsically motivated student, who values learning as a meaningful and fulfilling activity (Brophy, 1987). Hudley et al. (2002) defines intrinsic motivation as “the innate tendency to learn for the sake of personal satisfaction in increasing one's own capacities” (p. 2). Highly motivated students are described as enthusiastic, interested, involved, hard working and persistent, and actively cope with challenges and setbacks (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). “Academic intrinsic motivation is best understood as the product of an optimal match between the individual, the task, and the learning

environment” (Hudley et al., 2002). Results of Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (2001) indicate, instead of focusing on tangible rewards, extrinsic motivators, for motivating students, to focus more on how to facilitate intrinsic motivation by starting with the student’s perspective to develop interesting learning activities, to provide more choice, and to ensure that activities are challenging. Although extrinsic rewards may control immediate behaviors, they undermine the intrinsic value of experiences. To keep students engaged and working in school, educators must work with students to make certain that lessons hold value and align curriculum with student interest (McPhail, Pierson, Freeman, Goodman & Ayappa, 2000). Marks (2000) finds that authentic instructional work influences student engagement. Students who experience intrinsic motivation are more likely to strive to achieve academically and to maintain a positive attitude toward those efforts (Hudley et al., 2002). Conversely, students who experience low intrinsic motivation report that the school environment is more debilitating than students with high intrinsic motivation (Harter, 1996).

### *Emotional Engagement*

Emotional engagement refers to students’ affective reactions in the classroom, including interests, values, and positive or negative emotional responses (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004). Some researchers assess emotional engagement by measuring students’ feelings about their school and teacher (Klem & Connell, 2004). Others conceptualize it as identification with school—a sense of belonging and valuing school success (Finn, 1989; Voelkl, 1997).

Fredricks et al. (2004) find that the construct of emotional engagement overlaps with motivational research. Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" is perhaps the most widely discussed theory of motivation. While Maslow ranks "belongingness" in the middle of his motivational hierarchy, some researchers suggest that the need to belong can be viewed as a fundamental element in human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). "Human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong, that is, by a strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 522). In order for this need to be satisfied, two criteria are involved: "First, there is a need for frequent, affectively pleasant interactions with a few other people, and second, these interactions must take place in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for others' welfare" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). Thus, teachers have a major impact on student's motivation to learn (Harter, 1996; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). For students to consider fulfilling academic achievement and ultimately, self-actualization, both at the top end of the hierarchy, students must build a relationship with their teachers and feel supported by them (Klem & Connell, 2004). Unfortunately, the transition to high school coincides with declining nurturing characteristics of teacher-student relationships and therefore, impacting academic achievement (Harter, 1987). Students who feel a sense of belonging have strong affective ties to their teacher (Libbey, 2004).

Finn (1989) cites that students who identify with their school have an internalized conception of belongingness and value success in school-relevant goals. Finn (1989) defines identification as belonging, when students feel they are an integral part of the

school environment, and value, when students appreciate their success in school-related outcomes. Likewise, Voelkl (1997) argues that identification with school is necessary for school engagement. Students—who are active participators in school, who are engaged, and who feel that they belong to their school—are not the students with the problems (Voelkl, 1997). Research indicates that students, who like school and their teachers and who are confident in their ability to succeed, should be more engaged and excited about participating in classroom activities than students with negative attitudes toward school and low perceptions of their academic abilities (Voelkl, 1997). Students who do not feel a sense of belonging or value school may not develop adequate strategies for school engagement. School engagement, described in terms of behavioral and emotional identification, significantly contributes to academic achievement (Finn, 1993; Finn & Rock, 1997).

Schools can influence how students feel about where they are in school.

“Engaging schools promote a sense of belonging by personalizing instruction, showing an interest in students’ lives, and creating a supportive, caring social environment” (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004, p. 3). Thus, students who are engaged with school are more likely to learn, to find the experience rewarding, to graduate, and to pursue higher education (Marks, 2000).

### *Classroom Context*

Classroom factors that support engagement include teacher support, peers, classroom structure, autonomy support, and task characteristics (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Hudley et al. (2002) and Klem and Connell (2004) found perceived teacher support to be related to behavioral engagement specifically. Research has shown the impact of peers on behavioral and emotional engagement. Peer acceptance is associated with satisfaction in school as well as appropriate behavior and academic effort (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Teacher behavior enhances student engagement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

There is a reciprocal relationship between teacher behavior and student engagement in the classroom. Teachers who are caring, sincere, and provide clear expectations and guidance for their students increase student engagement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). In their work, Klem and Connell (2004) examine associations between teacher support, engagement, and educational outcomes. Findings indicate that (a) teacher support is critical to student engagement as reported by teachers and students, (b) students who reported greater teacher support are almost three times more probable to have higher engagement, (c) students with higher reported engagement believe teachers created caring and well structured learning environments with clear and fair expectations, and (d) higher levels of engagement are associated with higher attendance and test scores. According to Klem & Connell (2004), in classrooms where the teacher has developed strong personal relationships, with and among the class, students demonstrate more positive attitudes and higher overall satisfaction.

There is an association between peers and engagement. Research suggests that students cluster with their peers of similar levels of engagement (Kindermann, 1993; Kindermann, McCollam, & Gibson, 1996). Kindermann's (1993) findings show that elementary school children, affiliated with high engagement peer groups, increased their

level of behavioral engagement during the course of the school year. Peer support is associated with aspects of emotional and behavioral engagement—satisfaction in school, socially appropriate behavior, and academic effort. Ainley et al. (2005) report several findings on their research involving peer group engagement, peer acceptance and rejection, and peer interaction in learning. Findings indicate that belonging to a high engagement peer group tends to increase an individual's behavioral engagement. Similarly, a peer group that rejects learning has a negative impact on engagement at the individual level. The study shows that girls are more likely than boys to have peer groups supportive of school learning. Also, they report that peer acceptance is linked to emotional and behavioral engagement, while peer rejection is associated with lower interest. Cognitive engagement is increased by interactions with peers during learning.

There is a body of literature that reveals the impact of the structure of the classroom on engagement. Findings from the motivational literature show that schools must maintain a climate that promotes a positive attitude in students of all ethnicities and therefore encourage all students' engagement in learning (Hudley et al., 2002). The climate a teacher establishes in the classroom has shown to effect engagement among students of all ages (Hudley et al., 2002). Research from Skinner and Belmont (1993) and others shows that teachers, who have clear expectations and demonstrate consistency, have students who are more behaviorally engaged, show greater attentiveness, spend more time on task, and exhibit less disruptive behavior. Students, who know what their teachers' expectations are and the consequences of not meeting those expectations, are more likely to be behaviorally engaged (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Teachers who exhibit

excellent classroom management skills lead classrooms where more students are on task and exhibit fewer disciplinary problems—indicators of behavioral engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Ames and Archer (1988) recommend that attempts be made in creating a classroom environment which establishes equitable performance goals to ensure academic achievement. In addition, Ames (1992) suggests that even though there are certain curricular and instructional demands in the classroom, student buy-in is important for academic achievement. A supportive, nurturing, and safe classroom—an environment of optimism and encouragement—contributes to student’s social-emotional well-being and engagement (Ainley et al., 2004). For these reasons, researchers are asking for a more “personalized learning environment” believing that this will lead to increased student attendance and achievement in school (Klem & Connell, 2004; NASSP, 2004).

Classrooms that support autonomy are characterized by choice, shared decision making, and absence of external motivations—rewards or punishments (Fredricks et al., 2004). Students are more engaged when they exercise autonomy and creativity in deciding how to organize their time and effort in fulfilling tasks (Brophy, 1987). “In classrooms that honor students’ voices, students may gain a sense that their ideas are worthy of being heard, of being taken seriously” (Oldfather, 1995, p. 422). In a responsive classroom culture, students are more willing to express themselves. The teacher helps to create this culture through inviting the students to express their feelings and ideas, listening responsively to what they say, celebrating student work, and involving them in the creation of the learning activities. The approaches taken in these classrooms include problem solving, simulations, role playing, and other cooperative

group activities providing opportunities for self-expression. Students with teachers that are autonomy-supportive demonstrate greater mastery motivation, perceived competence, intrinsic motivation, conceptual understanding, persistence in school, and academic achievement (Marks, 2000; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). On the contrary, students feel overly pressured if they perceive that every move they make is being prescribed and monitored by their teacher (Brophy, 1987).

There is a body of research that supports the claim that students will engage with tasks they find interesting, important, and challenging (Ainley et al., 2005). Students' perceptions of what is interesting, important, and challenging may vary. Interesting tasks range from catching attention to there is more to discover. Tasks are deemed important if they offer or lead to something of value. Challenging tasks are goal oriented. Fredricks et al. (2004) states that engagement in learning is stimulated by classrooms where tasks are authentic; provide for student ownership in the planning, implementing, reporting, and evaluating; provide for collaboration; encourage diverse talents; and provide for fun. Likewise, Marks (2000) reports that authentic and challenging tasks are associated with higher behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

In brief, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2004) has said,

Engaging schools and teachers promote students' confidence in their ability to learn and succeed in school by providing challenging instruction and support for meeting high standards, and they clearly convey their own high expectations for their students' success. They provide choices for students and they make the curriculum and instruction relevant to adolescents' experiences, culture, and long-term goals, so that students see some value in the high school curriculum (p. 2-3).

As can be seen in the literature, there is tremendous overlap with behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Yet, school engagement includes all three components. For example, attendance and participation in school-related activities (behavioral engagement) are directly related to students' identification with school and feelings of engagement (emotional engagement). When students are absent, they are not there to learn the material being presented and form important bonds with teachers and other students which may help them feel more connected to school. If students do not participate in extracurricular activities, they do not form emotional bonds to clubs teams or other students with similar interests. Students who possess positive attitudes towards learning (emotional engagement) are more inclined to adopt effective learning strategies (cognitive engagement) (Ainley et al., 2005). Researchers use the process of engagement to not only examine how students make connections to school and what the effects are when students feel connected to their school but also to identify when students feel disengaged from their school and their learning (Finn, 1989; 1993).

### Disengagement

While it has been noted that engagement plays a critical role in educational outcomes, low levels of engagement continue to be found in schools.

Students who are engaged with school are more likely to learn, to find the experience rewarding, to graduate, and to pursue higher education. Despite its importance, research studies over the past two decades have documented low levels of student engagement in U. S. schools (Marks, 2000, p. 154).

Sadly, the notion of disengagement is proving to be a significant and continual problem in today's high school environment (Marks, 2000). Forty to sixty percent of high school

students are disengaged which has a negative impact on student achievement (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004). Students who do not feel engaged in their school, in relationships with teachers, and in extracurricular activities are not as academically successful as students who feel more engaged in school, with teachers, and coursework (Alexander et al., 1997; Finn, 1989; 1993). Unfortunately, many high schools are not providing engaging school programs or fostering relationships with caring adults. Thus, a majority of high school students across the nation are electing to drop out. Research shows that disengagement, the absence of a feeling of connection to school, is a predictor of dropping out of school (Alexander et al., 1997; Finn, 1989; 1993). The high school dropout epidemic affects almost one-third of all public high school students in America with a graduation rate of 68% to 71% (Greene & Winters, 2005; Swanson, 2004). Graduation rates for blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans fall to around 50%; and those for whites and Asians are higher around 75% to 77%, respectively (Greene & Winters, 2005; Swanson, 2004). In large urban schools with a high concentration of students living in poverty, on average fewer than 50% of the students entering the ninth grade will leave with a high school diploma (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004).

This issue not only jeopardizes the future of individuals but also impacts our cities and nation due to loss of productive workers, earnings and revenue produced, and costs associated with imprisonment, health care, and social services. Dropouts from high school earn approximately \$9,200 less in a year than graduates and roughly \$1 million less over a lifetime than those who graduate from college (Doland, 2001, as cited in

Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). “Dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced, and ultimately single parents with children who drop out from high school themselves” (Rumberger, 2001, as cited in Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 2). There are studies showing that the cost to the nation for each dropout, over the course of their lifetime, who moves to a life of drugs and crime, will be between \$1.7 million and \$2.3 million (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, as cited in Bridgeland et al., 2006).

In *The Silent Epidemic* researchers cite that while there is no individual reason why students drop out of high school, students reported being bored and disengaged as a major reason (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In that study, researchers interviewed 467 ethnically diverse 16- to 25-year-olds who had dropped out of high school from 25 various places across the country and conducted four focus groups in two major cities. The purpose of the study was to find out why they dropped out of high school and what might have helped them graduate. The top five reasons students identified for dropping out of school were as follows:

- Classes were not interesting (47%)
- Missed too many days and could not catch up (43%)
- Spent time with people who were not interested in school (42%)
- Had too much freedom and not enough rules in their life (38%)
- Was failing in school (35%) (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 3)

Dropping out of high school is not a sudden decision but rather a slow process of disengagement, academically and socially. The study showed that at least one to three years before dropping out the students exhibited a loss of interest in school.

Other studies have noted that indicators of dropping out appear early in a student's educational experience (Alexander et al., 1997; Audas & Willms, 2001; Finn, 1989). These warning signs include attendance patterns: refusing to wake up, missing school, skipping class, and taking long lunches (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Neild et al. (2008) suggests difficulty in navigating the transition to high school significantly increases the probability of leaving high school without ever finishing. The study describes the student profile for dropping out: experience difficulty academically in the ninth grade, repeat the ninth grade, and experience difficulty transitioning to ninth grade. Nationally, the most common indicator of student engagement and predictor of dropping out is absenteeism (Rumberger, 2001). Other indicators, according to students, are low grades, behavioral problems, lack of involvement in class and in extracurricular activities, pregnancy, being held back a grade, transferring from another school, and difficulty with the ninth grade transition. Seventy-one percent of students reported a loss of interest in school in the ninth and tenth grades (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

While the literature acknowledges dropping out as a gradual process of disengagement over time (Alexander et al., 1997), there still remains few longitudinal studies or retrospective studies. Findings from Alspaugh (1998) show a link between school transitions, school size, and SES and dropping out of high school. The study suggests achievement loss with each school transition a child experiences. Multiple

transitions increase achievement loss and, subsequently, widen the achievement gap associated with dropping out. Furthermore, students on free and reduced lunch attending large schools experience loss in academic achievement and eventually drop out (Alspaugh, 1998, Neild et al., 2008). Audas & Williams (2001) report that fostering a positive student experience and classroom environment which encourages engagement will help diminish the high drop-out and truancy rates prevalent in high schools. Bridgeland et al. (2006) claims that while there are no simple solutions, there are “supports” that schools and home can provide:

- improve teaching and curricula to make school more relevant and engaging and enhance the connection between school and work,
- improve instruction and access to supports for struggling students,
- build a school climate that fosters academics,
- ensure that students have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school, and
- improve the communication between parents and schools (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. v).

Findings from Daniels and Araposthathis (2005) showed that “encouraging participation, decreasing reliance on extrinsic motivators, emphasizing the value to be found in school curriculum, and building relationships that encourage effort in the face of disappointment are all lessons to be learned from our disengaged adolescents” (p. 55). As previously mentioned, ignoring the cries of disengaged students can have severe consequences.

## Summary

Even though an increasing body of research points to the importance of school engagement, the study of school engagement is still relatively new. Understanding how school engagement contributes to other educational outcomes, such as grades, attendance, and overall attitude about school is important in creating a learning environment where all students can succeed. Nonetheless, school engagement includes behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components that point toward commitment to learning and successful academic achievement. Evaluating school engagement is important if no other reason than for the costs associated with disengagement.

Including engagement measures in these intervention studies can provide insight into the degree to which engagement is responsive to variations in the environment and can point to specific school and classroom changes that have the largest effects on behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 74).

The positive school environment established by the Freshman Academy fosters the social, emotional, and academic needs that ninth graders must have to develop, grow, and learn. Research shows that students in Freshman Academies have better attendance records, fewer discipline problems, and more academic success. Students are better known and better guided by school staff. They report feeling more nurtured and more engaged with their school and their teachers. The previous literature would lead one to believe that combining block scheduling, interdisciplinary teams, smaller class sizes, intervention, and a school-within-a-school for ninth-grade students would result in greater achievement than the traditional ninth-grade program (Marshall, 2003). However, concerns include (a) rigor and care must be interwoven or educators run the risk of

creating small, nurturing environments that aren't schools and (b) care must be taken to avoid segregation along racial, ethnic, and SES lines when assigning students to the small learning communities or academies. The Freshman Academy is not a one-size-fits-all approach for middle school to high school transition; what works for one school may not work for another. According to Hertzog and Morgan (1998), "Transition programs should address all aspects of the transition—academic and social—so that the students have the greatest opportunity to succeed" (as cited in Letrello & Miles, 2003, p. 213).

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The method chapter includes the purpose of the study, research questions, participants, setting of the study, description of the treatment, design method of the study, and measures.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was (a) to determine whether a high school transition program, Freshman Academy, for at-risk ninth-grade students improves attendance, academic achievement, and school engagement; (b) to explore what aspects of the Freshman Academy promote school engagement; and (c) to determine what improvements could be made to the Freshman Academy program.

### Research Questions

The study was guided by three research questions:

Question 1: What is the impact of the Freshman Academy on (a) attendance, (b) academic achievement, and (c) school engagement?

Question 2: According to students, what aspects of the Freshman Academy promote school engagement?

Question 3: According to students, what improvements could be made to the Freshman Academy program?

## Participants

The population for this study was ninth-grade students who are at risk of failing the ninth grade and not graduating from high school. The target population was the ninth-grade students who had been identified as at risk at a high school in a suburb of Denver, Colorado. The school was selected based on the availability of a Freshman Academy program, principal's willingness, and convenience for the researcher. Purposefully selected samples were used (Groves, Flower, Couper, Lepkowski, Singer, & Tourangeau, 2004). The sampling procedure used to select participants for the current study was a convenience sample because of their willingness and availability to be studied (Creswell, 2005). The treatment group consisted of students scheduled in the Freshman Academy and the comparison group consisted of ninth grade students in a reading class that met the criteria of the Freshman Academy but were not given the treatment during the 2007-2008 school year. In this case, the predetermined nature of the treatment group did not allow for the possibility of random assignment.

For the purpose of this study, data collection for only those students identified as participants in the study by student and parental consent was gathered. Participation in the study was anonymous. During the 2007-2008 school year, 385 students were enrolled in the ninth grade, of which, 54 ninth-grade students were enrolled in the Freshman Academy, treatment group, and 44 ninth-grade students were enrolled in a reading class, comparison group. Of those 54 students in the Freshman Academy, 46 participated in the pretest and 40 completed both the pre- and posttest. The rate of attrition was six students. Attrition was due to students transferring schools within or outside the district,

absenteeism, and removal from the Freshman Academy program. Of those 44 students in the reading classes, 19 completed both pre- and posttest.

Table 3.1

*Demographics of Freshman Academy*

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Age:	
<i>M</i>	14.24
<i>SD</i>	.48
Gender:	
Male	45.7%
Female	54.3%
Ethnicity:	
White/Anglo	43.5%
African American	4.3%
Hispanic/Latino	19.6%
American Indian	4.3%
Other/Multiple Responses	28.3%

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Procedure

The study was started during the second week of 2007-2008 school calendar and ended during the 38<sup>th</sup> week of 2007-2008 school calendar. For the purpose of this study, a pretest was administered on August 31 and September 13, 2007, to all participants in the Freshman Academy and the reading classes, respectively. The posttest was administered on April 25 and May 9, 2008 to the participants in the reading classes and Freshman Academy, respectively. Eighth- and ninth-grade attendance and grade point average data collection for the Freshman Academy were obtained through school record keeping systems.

Consent forms were distributed by the counselor to the sample and both parental and student signatures will be obtained and returned to the same person (see Appendix C and D). Students were assured confidentiality and informed that the collected data would

not identify anyone by name. At the beginning of the school year, and again at the end, the researcher administered the student survey to all participants, a procedure contributing to a high return rate (Creswell, 2005). The student survey solicited student opinions and attitudes on school engagement.

To preserve anonymity of students, student identification numbers were used. The researcher analyzed the survey data, attendance data, and grade point average using numerical identification. The Freshman Academy participants in the interviews in the study were determined, first, on a volunteer basis as well as parental consent given. Then, the Freshman Academy teachers assisted me in selecting the students who offered a range of characteristics including gender, ethnicity, and academic ability.

#### Setting of the Study

The study took place in Smallville High School, a public high school located in a southwest suburb of Denver, Colorado. The socio-economic status of the people was predominantly middle class. There were three public high schools in the school district. Smallville High School reported to the Colorado Department of Education a fall enrollment of 1627 students grades 9-12 and maintained an average daily student population of 1528 students: 80.0% White (not Hispanic), 2.9% Black (not Hispanic), 2.8% Asian/Pacific Islander, 13.5% Hispanic, and .8% American Indian/Alaskan Native, with 18.2% of the student body economically disadvantaged. On the 2007-2008 school accountability report, put together by the Colorado Department of Education, Smallville High School ranked “high” on the overall academic performance on state assessments,

one step below the highest ranking of “excellent.” The graduation rate for 2008 was 73.9%.

Table 3.2

*Ecological Representation of Grade 9*

Grade	Gender	n	%	1	Ethnicity			
					2	3	4	5
9	Male	194	50	.5	1.6	4.1	13.4	80.4
	Female	191	50	.5	2.6	3.2	13.1	80.6
Total		385	100	.5	2.1	3.6	13.3	80.5

*Note.* Ethnicity codes correspond to the following (1) American Indian or Alaskan Native, (2) Asian or Pacific Islander, (3) Black (not Hispanic), (4) Hispanic, and (5) White (not Hispanic).

Treatment

This study was an investigation into the effectiveness of a ninth-grade transition program, the Freshman Academy, aimed at improving academic achievement, attendance, and school engagement for at-risk students. In addition, aspects of the program aimed at increasing school engagement and improvements that could be made to the program will be examined.

The Freshman Academy was implemented in 2003-2004 school year, functioning as a school-within-a-school. The Freshman Academy was specifically for ninth-grade students who are at risk of not being successful during their high school experience unless they are in a more supportive environment. This environment allowed them the opportunity to acquire the skills necessary to help them be successful in life. The criteria used to identify the freshman that are “at risk” included the following:

- below grade level literacy skills,

- below grade level mathematical skills,
- transient enrollment,
- ability at or above grade level,
- attendance/discipline problems,
- poor performance—especially in math and language arts courses,
- motivational issues
- self-esteem/social issues
- family problems/ poor coping skills

In the Freshman Academy there were 54 male and female students representative of the ethnicity in the entire school. Students were selected for the Freshman Academy from a process which included either a referral by a middle school teacher or counselor or a self-referral followed by an application by the student. Following the initial application, the team of teachers in the Freshman Academy researched each student's academic performance, social issues, and history of disciplinary and/or attendance problems. They also conducted an interview with each applicant to assess whether the Freshman Academy was the best possible placement for them at Smallville High School (see Appendix A for Smallville HS Student Interview Question protocol).

The structure of the program utilized interdisciplinary teaming, school-within-a-school, block scheduling, and extra support. The Freshman Academy had four core teachers teaching the academic subjects: ninth grade language arts, literacy development, Interactive Mathematics Program (IMP) year 1, and math methods. The ninth-grade students in the Freshman Academy also took geography taught by two of the Freshman

Academy teachers and an elective (physical education, art, practical arts) or science or world language class (if middle school grades showed aptitude in these areas or upon parent request) taught by teachers in the mainstream of the school each semester. The assistant principal oversaw the Freshman Academy program. The freshman counselor was integral in the application and acceptance process with the Freshman Academy, as well as involved with referrals made throughout the year by the Freshman Academy teachers.

The core teachers utilized a common planning time. During this time they were able to address student needs as well as create thematic units. The teachers were able to discuss students that were not achieving academically, having behavior or attendance problems, or having social/emotional issues. Teachers also used this time to collaborate on interdisciplinary lessons related to a theme. The teachers use a constructivist approach to teaching. Periodically, they meet as a team with the assistant principal and counselor to discuss the “big picture” for students and the program.

Being a school-within-a-school the core teachers rooms were located in close proximity utilizing a wing of the school. It provided consistency, convenience to the students and teachers of the program, and the most time on task as possible for students during the school day. This allowed the teachers to communicate easily throughout the day. Also, the students did not interrupt the rest of the school and vice versa since they operated on different schedules.

The Freshman Academy operated from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm each day on a modified block schedule for their core classes, while the rest of the school operated on a

four block schedule, alternating every other day. The Freshman Academy students attended mathematics and language arts classes each day for 90-minute periods. Every Monday and Thursday, the students attended their odd-numbered class periods; and every Tuesday and Friday, they attended their even-numbered class periods. Wednesday the students alternated attending odd- and even-numbered classes.

Extra support was given to the students by the Freshman Academy teachers. Before and after school as well as lunch time, the teachers were available to provide individualized instruction and one-on-one interactions with students. The Mental Health Mondays allowed the teachers to provide students with extra support. This period was utilized in many different ways. Social and emotional issues were discussed such as birth control, STDs, tobacco awareness, drug awareness, and alternative education. Also, Freshman Academy community meetings were held every morning of the week. This time was used for the announcements, pledge of allegiance, awards, problem solving, and games and activities. Team building activities were used especially at the beginning of the school year when students and teachers were just getting to know one another.

In addition, this program included high expectations for all students, a strict attendance policy, and small class sizes. The teacher to student ratio for the Freshman Academy was not to exceed 1:20, ideally 1:15. The goals of the Freshman Academy included behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects.

- Students in the program will get to “proficient” or above on the ninth grade Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) reading, writing, and math tests.

- As sophomores, students will be successful in the mainstream (no students on the multiple Ds and Fs lists).
- Increased retention rates for the entire high school experience.
- Increased attendance during entire high school experience.
- Increased self-esteem and emotional well-being.
- Increased motivation in each individual.

### Design

The current study used a quasi-experimental pre- and posttest comparison design with no random assignment to answer research question one. The quasi-experimental pre- and posttest design was a four-step process for both groups. “The researcher assigns intact groups the experimental and control treatments, administers a pretest to both groups, conducts experimental treatment activities with the experimental group only, and then administers a posttest to assess the differences between the two groups” (Creswell, 2005, p. 298).

In the current study, due to the lack of randomization, one intact group and a comparison group with similar characteristics was used. The researcher, with the assistance of the school’s assistant principal, was able to identify an intact group of ninth-grade students comparable to the Freshman Academy students. While the quasi-experimental design has the advantage of using intact groups in the educational setting, it also introduces several threats that must be addressed. Without the randomization, the groups may differ and be susceptible to threats to validity. “A threat to validity means that design issues may threaten the experiment so that the conclusions reached from data may

provide a false reading about probable cause and effect between the treatment and the outcome” (Creswell, 2005, p. 290).

Threats of internal validity involve problems that threaten drawing correct inferences that arise due to experimental procedures or experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2005). In this study there existed potential threats to internal validity related to the participants: history, maturation, regression, selection, and mortality and related to the procedures of the study: testing and instrumentation. The study extended over the nine-month school year. Historical or unanticipated events may have occurred between the pretest and posttest that may have influenced the outcome (Creswell, 2005). Natural maturation, developmental changes during this time, was likely to occur in the participants and these changes could have affected their scores between the pretest and posttest. To help guard against these problems, participants experienced the same transition activities (except for the treatment) during the study and participants were selected who mature and develop similarly, in this case at the same grade level.

Threats of regression and selection may have also occurred in the current study. Regression is a potential threat in an experiment in which the researcher selects individuals for a group based on extreme scores, like the participants at risk of dropping out of school, who will naturally do better (or worse) on the posttest than on the pretest regardless of the treatment (Creswell, 2005). “People factors” may have introduced threats that influence the outcome, such as selecting students more receptive to the treatment (Creswell, 2005). It was the purpose of this study to present enough information to make it reasonable that results could be replicated in similar situations.

Threats of mortality were very much a viable possibility in this study. Records were kept on the number of students who dropped out of the study.

Testing and instrumentation were potential threats to internal validity associated with the procedures of the study. Participants may have become familiar with outcome measures and remember responses for later testing (Creswell, 2005). To correct for this potential problem, the participants were given the instrument only twice with approximately eight months between administration. Between these administrations there existed the threat of changes to the instrument; therefore, standardized procedures, same scales and instrument, were used throughout the study (Creswell, 2005).

In addition, one-on-one interviews with the researcher were conducted to examine what aspects of the Freshman Academy promoted school engagement and what improvements can be made to the program. Six student volunteers, three male and three female, from the Freshman Academy were interviewed and tape recorded by the researcher in an empty classroom. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interview guide used by the researcher contained background (or demographic) questions to assess personal characteristics of the participants, attitudinal or opinion questions, and behavioral questions (see Appendix E for Student Interview Guide). Research shows the need to gather qualitative data on students' school engagement to better design interventions and understand how this affects school reform efforts (Fredricks et al., 2004).

## Measures

The dependent variables in the current study were academic achievement, attendance, and school engagement. Academic achievement scores were based on four-point scale calculating the students' grade point average (GPA): A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, and F=0. All classes received equal weighting in calculating the GPA. The eighth- and ninth-grade GPA for the treatment group only was measured. Also, the eighth- and ninth-grade attendance for the treatment group was measured by the percentage of unexcused absences. The middle schools operated on periods so attendance was taken for each period. The percentage of unexcused absences was calculated dividing the total of unexcused periods by the total number of periods (which varied by school) for the school year and multiplying by 100. Since the high school operates on a four block schedule, attendance is taken by half blocks. The total unexcused absences were divided by the total number of blocks for the school year and multiplied by 100 to calculate the percentage of unexcused absences. School engagement is characterized as a meta-construct consisting of the following domains: behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement (Fredricks, et al, 2004). See Appendix B for the items on the Student Survey on School Engagement.

The Student Survey on School Engagement was developed by the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) to measure students' school engagement in order to assess whether interventions had an effect on student engagement. The questions were related to the three types of school engagement: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks, et al, 2004; NCSE, 2006). This three-

part questionnaire on school engagement included questions on the following: relationships between student and teacher, relationships between student and peers, attitudes toward school attendance and discipline, school connectedness, academic achievement, and school climate.

The current study used this survey instrument because it utilized quantitative data to examine a students' level of school engagement and allows for comparison over time. Closed-ended items were used. These 15 survey items were answered using a Likert scale, coded from 1 to 5 with the more students agree with the statement the higher the score. The first five items examined behavioral engagement, which concentrated on class preparedness, student-teacher and student-peer relationship, completion of schoolwork and following rules. These items could be answered with the following choices: *Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, or Strongly Agree*. The next five items assessed cognitive engagement, which addressed perceptions and behaviors toward learning and studying. The remaining five items addressed emotional engagement, which focused on attitudes toward school, classwork, staff, and peers. The last ten items consisted of the following choices: *Never/Almost Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, and Always/Almost Always*. For each student in the treatment and comparison groups, the above items were averaged in order to determine a score for each construct—behavioral, cognitive, and emotional—and a total engagement score was determined as an average of the three constructs of school engagement.

The Student Survey on School Engagement was tested for both validity and reliability by NCSE (2006). A valid instrument is one that measures what it is supposed

to measure. Convergent validity, which utilizes constructs similar to the instrument, examined whether the engagement scales were related to other school outcomes such as GPA and attendance. Behavioral engagement was more significantly related to attendance than academic achievement. Cognitive engagement was more consistently correlated with academic achievement. Emotional engagement was related to academic achievement. All the scales showed correlation with one another. With correlations ranging from not significant to .93 showed that they are related, not measuring identical concepts within engagement (NCSE, 2006). There is some evidence for concurrent validity between engagement and achievement. Emotional (.136), cognitive (.235), and behavioral (.395) engagement correlate low to moderate with GPA (Skalsky, 2009). Content validity is based on Fredricks et al. (2004) theory. This is important because the construct of school engagement is multidimensional as well as integrated.

A reliable instrument produces the same measure when used with the same population repeatedly. In the study Skalsky (2009), Cronbach's Alpha reliability tests ran on each scale met the desired criterion of .70 in social sciences in all cases and showed a relatively high level of reliability. The reliability for behavioral engagement was .732, for cognitive engagement was .765, and for emotional engagement was .802. These numbers ran from zero to one with the higher the number showing more likely that the items on the instrument were measuring what they were intended to measure.

## CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

This chapter is organized by the research questions used to frame the current study.

Question 1: What is the impact of the Freshman Academy on (a) attendance, (b) academic achievement, and (c) school engagement?

Question 2: According to students, what aspects of the Freshman Academy promote school engagement?

Question 3: According to students, what improvements could be made to the Freshman Academy program?

A summary of the data gathered from the Student Survey on School Engagement, the eighth- and ninth-grade unexcused absences, the eighth- and ninth-grade GPAs, and student interviews is presented in this chapter through tables, figures, and narrative form.

### Results from the Quantitative Data

The first section provides the analysis of the data and results used to determine whether a high school transition program, Freshman Academy, for at-risk, ninth-grade students improves attendance, academic achievement, and school engagement. The data from the student survey on school engagement, on unexcused absences, and on GPAs was compiled and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The following statistical methods were pursued using SPSS. In order to answer research question one, descriptive statistics will be used.

### *Research Question #1*

What is the impact of the Freshman Academy on attendance, academic achievement, and school engagement?

Null Hypothesis 1A: There will be no differences in school engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) between the Freshman Academy and comparison group.

Null Hypothesis 1B: There will be no differences between the eighth-grade and ninth-grade unexcused absences data for the Freshman Academy.

Null Hypothesis 1C: There will be no differences between the eighth-grade and ninth-grade GPA for the Freshman Academy.

An independent t-test was used to test for differences in the three areas of school engagement for the Freshman Academy and comparison group. A paired sample t-test was used to compare the eighth-grade and ninth-grade unexcused absences and the eighth- grade and ninth-grade GPA. Average gain scores in the Freshman Academy were compared for the dependent variables—GPA, unexcused absences, and school engagement.

*Null Hypothesis 1A: There will be no differences in school engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) between the Freshman Academy and comparison group.*

An independent t-test was utilized to test for differences in school engagement. Results of the independent t-test are presented in Tables 4.1 and 4.2.

Table 4.1

*Summary Group Statistics of Posttest by Engagement Scale*

Scale	Group	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Behavior	Freshman Academy	40	3.81	.48
	Comparison	19	4.31	.59
Cognitive	Freshman Academy	40	3.15	.76
	Comparison	19	3.35	.55
Emotional	Freshman Academy	40	3.35	.90
	Comparison	19	3.22	.61
Total Engagement	Freshman Academy	40	3.43	.63
	Comparison	19	3.62	.44

Table 4.1 presents the group statistics (sample population, means, and standard deviation) for the Freshman Academy and comparison group from the posttest scores for the measures in the study. Analysis of pretest engagement scores showed differences in emotional engagement. The Freshman Academy mean score was significantly higher than the comparison group. To control for these differences, I had to do an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). This procedure adjusted the posttest emotional engagement scores for both groups, the Freshman Academy and the comparison group.

Table 4.2

*Summary Statistics for the Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Posttest Means by Group*

Scale	t	df	P	M Difference
Behavioral	3.47	57	.001*	-.50
Cognitive	-1.04	57	.302	-.20
Emotional	.54	57	.590	.12
Total Engagement	-1.20	57	.237	-.19

Note. \* $p < .01$ , two-tailed. Used equal variances assumed.

The independent t-test as shown in Table 4.2 compares the posttest means of the two groups for all three areas of engagement and total engagement and shows the t value indicating whether the average differences are significant or not beyond the point of  $\leq .01$  level. For behavioral engagement I failed to reject the null hypothesis. The comparison group actually performed better than the Freshman Academy. For emotional engagement I failed again to reject the null hypothesis because there were no differences between the comparison group and the Freshman Academy. And for cognitive engagement there were no differences; therefore, I cannot reject the null hypothesis.

*Null Hypothesis 1B: There will be no differences between the eighth-grade and ninth-grade unexcused absences data for the Freshman Academy.*

*Null Hypothesis 1C: There will be no differences between the eighth-grade and ninth-grade GPA for the Freshman Academy.*

A paired samples t-test was utilized to compare eighth-grade and ninth-grade unexcused absences and eighth-grade and ninth-grade GPA. Results from the paired samples test are presented in Table 4.3 and 4.4.

Table 4.3

*Freshman Academy Paired Samples Statistics of Unexcused Absences and GPA*

		<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Pair 1	8 <sup>th</sup> -grade GPA	48	1.85	.52
	9 <sup>th</sup> -grade GPA	48	1.91	.81
Pair 2	8 <sup>th</sup> -grade Unexcused Absences	48	1.72	2.42
	9 <sup>th</sup> -grade Unexcused Absences	48	.57	1.57

Table 4.4

*Paired Samples t-Test Comparing 8<sup>th</sup>- and 9<sup>th</sup>-grade Unexcused Absences and GPA*

		Paired Differences		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Pair 1	8 <sup>th</sup> -grade GPA- 9 <sup>th</sup> -grade GPA	-.06	.76	-.52	47	.602
Pair 2	8 <sup>th</sup> -grade Unex. Absences- 9 <sup>th</sup> -grade Unex. Absences	1.15	2.89	2.74	47	.009*

Note. \* $p < .01$ , two-tailed.

Pre- and post-GPAs showed no change. For unexcused absences I was able to reject the null hypothesis. The averages were significantly different from eighth grade to ninth grade. The average number of unexcused absences was reduced by two-thirds. The number of unexcused absences is how truancy is measured. The Colorado Department of Education's (CDE) definition for truancy is: "If a student is absent without an excuse by the parent/guardian or if the student leaves school or a class without permission of the teacher or administrator in charge, it will be considered to be an unexcused absence and the student shall be considered truant" (CDE, 2007). The Colorado Revised Statute defines "habitual truant" as: "A child who has attained the age of seven years and is under the age of seventeen years having four unexcused absences from public school in any one

month or ten unexcused absences from public school during any school year” (CDE, 2007). When I looked at the number of students that would be considered habitual truant in eighth and ninth grade, there were six compared to only two, respectively. Truancy is known to be linked to dropping out of high school. Studies have shown that the most common indicator of student engagement and predictor of dropping out is absenteeism (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Rumberger, 2001). Likewise, truancy is often a warning sign of failure; and failure often leads to students dropping out, not graduating high school, which affects their chances of success (Railsback, 2004). Truancy may only be the beginning of a lifetime of problems. There are societal implications: unemployment, poverty, and poor health. Also, truancy is associated with delinquent and criminal activity, such risky behaviors as drugs, alcohol, and violence (Garry, 1996).

In summary, the assumption that the Freshman Academy would have a positive impact on school engagement and academic achievement was not supported. I failed to reject the null hypotheses. The data shows that there was not a positive gain on the Student Survey on School Engagement or for GPAs. Engagement relates to achievement but not very strong. This concurs with Blum & Libbey (2004), “the more engaged a student is in school, the better the academic performance and achievement” (p. 231). However, the decrease in unexcused absences proved to be significant. Research shows that behavioral engagement is more closely related to attendance than academic achievement (NCSE, 2006).

Qualitative findings were quite different from those results from the engagement survey, attendance data, and GPA data. These findings are discussed in the next section.

## Findings from the Qualitative Data

In this section I discussed the themes that emerged from the student interviews. These themes will be discussed in the responses to the research questions below. The title for each theme will be derived from the students' own words. A comprehensive body of literature representing the voices and needs of the at-risk—disengaged, reluctant—learner does not exist. “An important goal of using student voices as a research and evaluation tool is to challenge educators about their assumptions and understandings of low-performing students” (Lee, 1999, p. 217). When useful, I included findings by previous researchers that support what the students said.

### *Research Question #2*

According to students, what aspects of the Freshman Academy promote engagement?

The findings from the student interviews are organized through the three constructs of school engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. The students identified specific structures and practices of the Freshman Academy that contributed to the promotion of school engagement. This multidimensional construct of school engagement is described by Skinner and Belmont (1993) as

Children who are engaged show sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by a positive emotional tone. They select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; they show generally positive emotions during ongoing action including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity and interest (p. 572).

### *Impact on Behavioral Engagement*

Behavioral engagement includes participation, involvement, and conduct. Several questions were posed to students over how the Freshman Academy promoted the behavioral aspect of school engagement:

- Do you play any sports or involved in any other clubs/extra-curricular activities?
- Did you have good attendance this year?
- Did you get in any trouble at school this year?

When asked about their participation in extra-curricular school activities, most students were not involved. Of the six students interviewed only two were involved in school activities this past year. These two students participated in either a sport or club which were coached or sponsored by Freshman Academy teachers. One other student had started practicing with one of the sports teams but quit after a month because he was not showing up to enough practices. Another student expressed an interest in playing a sport next year.

Most students emphasized their consistent attendance for their Freshman Academy classes. Attendance seemed to be an issue for students only in their classes outside of the Freshman Academy.

*The classes upstairs were just like nothing as compared to this [Freshman Academy] .... I'm so used to [Freshman Academy] teachers interacting with me instead of just like being, here—work on this—okay—go; but like the [Freshman Academy] teachers really interact with you...like, ask what your opinion is, whether you thought it was a good book and stuff.... That's why I like the Academy a lot!*

The students stressed the prominence of lecture-based classes outside the Academy in which little class discussion, projects, or activities took place resulting in little engagement. Further, students felt teachers gave assignments without adequate explanation.

In high school students have more freedoms and more options that lead them away from class and school. Cutting class was a practice developed early on for many respondents in their freshman year. Reasons that students cited for “ditching class” included:

- *They [teachers outside the Freshman Academy] weren't as personal.*
- *They [teachers outside the Freshman Academy] don't give us as much care.*
- *The extra classes don't really matter to me.*
- *Boring*
- *No fun*
- *They [teachers outside the Freshman Academy] talk a lot.*
- *I just thought hanging out with my friends outside would be nice.*
- *I was thinking of dropping a class; and then, I was too busy to try to get it done...so, I just started ditching that class.*

Lack of caring, reflected in teacher apathy, was a common theme students noticed in their non-Freshman Academy teachers. Since they sensed a lack of immediate consequences for their actions, they chose not go to classes where it was easiest to “get away” with not attending. Other reasons that were given for having excessive absences were health and home related: being sick, accompanying sick parent to hospital and emotionally dealing with the severe brain trauma suffered by an older sibling in an accident. Most students cited improvement second semester with their attendance.

*I'm still missing some classes but the fact that I'm even coming to school and being in those classes...Lately, I've been trying to focus on my grades.... I've been going to class.*

One student was rewarded by the Freshman Academy counselor for improving their attendance and was given a free food certificate for a local restaurant.

Four of the six students interviewed said that they received discipline referrals this past year. All four cited “ditching class” or excessive unexcused absences as the main reasons for why they got in trouble. One was suspended for a fighting incident and another was rude to a non-Freshman Academy teacher. “Although many teenagers loath to admit it, they prefer a school in which the adults monitor their whereabouts” (Holland & Mazzoli, 2001, p. 297). Students acknowledged their actions happening in the high school would be reported to Freshman Academy teachers. Freshman Academy teachers took the time to address these issues with the students.

*We [Freshman Academy teachers and I] just talked about what I need to do for the rest of the year. Like, what I can do to improve and stuff and so um, really, that's what I've just been doing.... Just not mess up.... I don't want to have the title of trouble-maker.*

*It [Freshman Academy] makes a difference because it made me change the way I acted. It made me improve the way I acted, like my attitude on things.*

In summary, it appears that the Freshman Academy does not have much impact on students overall participation in extra-curricular school activities, attendance in non-Freshman Academy classes and discipline referrals related to the non-Freshman Academy classes. However, the teacher-student relationship in the Freshman Academy has made a positive impact on students' behavioral engagement during the time students are in their Freshman Academy classes.

### *Impact on Emotional Engagement*

Emotional engagement refers to interests and emotions as well as relationships within the classroom—student-teacher and student-to-student. The researcher posed these questions to students to see how the Freshman Academy impacts the emotional aspect of school engagement:

- Do you like school?
- Do you like your teachers?
- Do you feel close to the students and teachers in the Freshman Academy?
- What are some things that you liked about the Freshman Academy?

*It's like a family.* This is one of the themes that surfaced in the interviews regarding the Freshman Academy. Students commented,

*Like, it's really good to be a family, like, a real family.*

In further describing their relationship with their Freshman Academy teachers, the students felt supported by their teachers and that the teachers took a personal interest in their students. For example, students discussed teachers who consistently interacted with them to check how they were doing academically, personally, and socially:

- *They're like my next set of parents*
- *Nice...respectful*
- *They're like family because they bug you and nag you a lot, but you know they're steering you to do better*
- *If you seem to be have trouble with something, they always make sure that you get the help you need*
- *I just feel like I can go to them [with] like, any issue that I have, and I can just...well, I can tell them pretty much anything*
- *When you are having a bad day, they like let you calm down...give you time to like, recuperate*
- *They really care about you*

- *They really become your friends*
- *They take the time to get to know their students and to know what is going on in your family*
- *Everyday is a new day.... They don't judge you on what you did the day before.*

The affective aspect of teaching seemed to be crucial for these at-risk students in having a positive school experience. The Freshman Academy teachers went out of their way to get to know their students and to create a classroom context in which their students felt cared for. Outside studies have noted that,

Teachers who routinely assumed a greater emotional and personal role in their students' lives by displaying concern about their progress and spending extra time with them came to motivate these learners to see the importance of schooling on their individual lives (Lee, 1999, p. 235).

*I want to belong.* The students felt a sense of belonging as shared by one student in the following statement:

*I kinda felt like a loner when I first came in here.... "Cause I was just starting my own thing, like, trying to figure out which group I want to belong....*

Students developed closeness to each other.

*There's no way that you could not be friends with anybody because, like...we're reading this book Lord of the Flies and ...there was, like, ten people in here and each one—we were working on team work...have to find a way to squeeze everybody into the square right there on the floor.*

The structure of the Freshman Academy was such that the students have the same teachers for several classes so they spend a lot of time together. One student cited,

*At the beginning of the year they taught us like empathy and stuff. Getting to know like other people's stories and being around them every single day this whole year is really like kind of knitted us close together. We couldn't not be friends even if we wanted to. Like, 'cause we all know each other, we all know that like some people don't have the best lives and stuff. But like, it's probably because of the teachers. Like, they brought us together.*

It was essential to build a sense of community among teachers and students, where a trust relationship was established and maintained. There is some evidence that if teachers build relationships and demonstrate a genuine interest in their students, then the students are more assent to learn (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Erickson, 1987). Other students commented,

*When having, like, a bad day, there's ten billion people who can help you.*

*There's really few that I'm really close to. And those would be like maybe like my best friends down here in the Freshman Academy.*

*It's another place where you have a group of friends.... They get on you about what you are doing and be there to help...get academically focused...and personal stuff.*

*At the start of the year, I wasn't like the kind of guy that talks to everybody.... So, as the year went through, I started talking to everybody. I just made friends with everybody, you know. 'Cause I just feel comfortable.*

*You get to be yourself, and you get to find out who you are.*

*It feels safe down here...comfortable...it's a home.*

*Last year, I only stick to my group, just the Mexican people. But this year, I talk to everyone no matter what. There is no color.*

*Just how it's like a little community on its own.*

The Freshman Academy was at least a place where students could feel comfortable, safe, and cared about. One student summarized it this way, “We knew everybody in there.” That made a difference in these students’ lives.

*Teach you in a different way.* Students cited examples of positive reactions in the classroom and exerting positive or negative reactions to learning activities.

- *They teach you in a different way*

- *They give us stuff that we could really use*
- *They make it fun*
- *I think Algebra is useless*

These students shared their testimonials of emotional engagement to a learning activity.

*This year has really been a hard year for me. And like at the beginning to the year, I was like a mute. I didn't talk at all. And like, it's kind of like the book, Speak, where I didn't talk at all. I like, always like, looked down. I was like sad and depressed and...I still am sometimes but not as much. And they helped me grow a lot.... She had me write in a journal. And I was to write like, letters to her and then she would write back when I gave it to her.... It's a lot easier to write about it instead of talk about it.*

*Like they taught us empathy because we read this book called, Of Mice and Men, and it's a really sad story.... The main, like, reason for the story was to be like empathetic to other people and they actually had us practice that in class and like, in the fifth day, we each got this piece of paper we had to fill out like...what is your favorite food and stuff.... And we had to go out to other people..... Like, the kids in the Freshman Academy have to talk to each other and find out like, if anyone likes any things they did. And like, a lot of the kids just started liking each other became friends and stuff.*

Teachers allowed for freedom of expression to help students find their individual voices when grappling with concepts and ideas. Students shared about how they were encouraged to express their own opinions and to share their own experiences related to the topics being studied.

*Like, we really got to interact with people, voice out our opinions and stuff. Like it's really fun.*

*Just uh, slightly more comfortable environment where students can open up and, uh, express themselves.*

Students identified the importance of this social aspect of the classroom as part of their social norms of the students' peer group.

*Mental health Mondays.* This aspect of the Freshman Academy was mentioned by several students.

*It's nice 'cause if we can have, like, group meetings like that and be social, then um, it just makes it all the more fun experience.*

*I like that we had Mental Health Mondays.... They, like, take an hour and have either someone come down and talk to us about something or we would watch a movie on something...that's, like, important...like they did one on rape...pregnancy...bullying and we watched "Mean Creek."*

Every Monday for an hour, the Freshman Academy had what was called Mental Health Monday. All the teachers and students gathered together in a community space in their Freshman Academy wing. The topics discussed usually centered on social, emotional, and physical issues surrounding adolescents. The students interviewed shared that they liked this time. One student shared her testimony to an even greater impact that the Freshman Academy and Mental Health Monday had on her life.

*Oh, I'd be dead.... I bottle up my emotions so badly that it just...It overcomes me, like, in the eighth grade and during the summer. And at home everybody's fighting. They can't get along and I was ready to kill myself. And I was planning to at the end of summer and then I came here and I was, like, oh my god, this really...this really saved my life.... It was the Mental Health Monday on rape.... It was at the beginning of the [school] year....My teacher...she was a social worker for rape crisis and then, um, with teens and so she talked to us about rape and everything.... I didn't feel so alone.... [She] just had me write to her in a journal...that helped.*

In summary, from the respondents I have gathered the importance of relationships to school engagement. If the students felt a connection to the other students, teachers, or curriculum, it made a difference in their view of schooling. Unlike the survey data

showed, from the student interviews it appears that the Freshman Academy has made a positive impact on students' emotional engagement in school.

### *Impact on Cognitive Engagement*

In the student interviews, the students were asked questions pertaining to how the Freshman Academy promoted the cognitive aspect of school engagement, which refers to motivation and effort:

- Is the class work fun and interesting?
- What kind of grades did you get in your classes this year?
- What are some things you liked about the Freshman Academy?

*Interesting and apply to our lives.* The students felt like their teachers really tried to make the material interesting and applicable to their lives. Students commented,

*There are some subjects where I actually go all out on... "Getting to know me" project—it has all sorts of little questions.... That one was fun...cool...interesting. It was about me.*

*They [Freshman Academy teachers] get books approved for us to read that are better and interesting...like applied to us like right now and in the future.*

This is important because “students enjoy learning more and they learn better, when topics are personally interesting and related to their lives” (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004, p. 52).

A major theme that ran throughout the student interviews was relevance. The need to be interested in what they were doing and see the value of the tasks they were asked to engage in was prevalent. One student said,

*They [Freshman Academy teachers] like make it apply to our lives and not be really boring,*

which supported the idea that reluctant learners engage in school if they see the value in the task. Another student commented,

*Like, sometimes in math, like, we go to the computer lab upstairs and I really like that because it's not just sitting in a room, like, being in trouble and stuff.... We were working on our stock market project.*

When teachers capitalized on that interest, they did not have to battle for classroom control or to worry about the lack of work produced (McPhail et al., 2000). Students value authentic instructional work. They need to see the relevance of what they are learning for their personal goals. With an emphasis on NCLB and standardized tests, educators cannot ignore students such as this one, who pointed out that,

*When I graduate from high school I get my diploma. I just don't like all the work we have to do to get there, especially with all the algebra and all that. I think algebra is useless.*

Outside studies suggest,

Student achievement is influenced by many factors, and although teachers cannot make students be motivated, the participants in the study suggested that teachers can pay attention to what students 'can and cannot stand' and design curriculum that addresses those needs (Daniel & Arapostathis, 2005, p. 45).

“Students can reliably describe their interests in learning, and that the use of these interests in the design of the curriculum can increase student engagement in learning” (McPhail et al., 2000, p. 60).

*Challenge, make things different, and provide support.* Engagement in activities is more likely to occur when students have the opportunities for stimulating and challenging experiences. Where as, this mostly refers to cognitive engagement—learning skills to

master a desired task, the excitement that accompanies the mastery process also relates to emotional engagement. One student replied,

*I like that there's always a challenge and that you learn....You can never guess what they're going to do the next day. I mean, they change...they make things different and funner for you to learn.*

Students said that they learned better when teachers took the time to present the material and concepts in multiple ways. Not only did the Freshman Academy teachers display enthusiasm for their content, but also tapped the social nature of the students' peer group.

*We had to read Of Mice and Men this year and my friend said it was the most boring book ever and I was, like, I thought it was the most amazing book....They (Freshman Academy teachers) read in class to us...do different character voices and then we have a lot of discussion about the book and we got a lot more out of the book.... It just got more interesting when we watched the movie after and, like, we discussed about what they did put in the movie, what they should have, and what they could have taken out.*

Students identified the social aspects of classrooms that were effective contexts for learning. Not only did the Freshman Academy teachers incorporate fun and interesting materials, but effective teachers in the Freshman Academy were described as implementing a variety of teaching practices:

- *games, being physically active*
- *puzzles*
- *going outside to read*
- *working in the computer lab*
- *using PowerPoint presentations*
- *field trips*
- *reading a loud in class*
- *discussions*
- *projects.*

These practices were only effective if the teachers were patient—explaining the material at varying paces depending on student levels of comprehension and offering individualized support to ensure that most students, if not all, received the necessary attention in class or outside of class. A student commented,

*They take it a lot slower down here [in the Freshman Academy] with math and reading and everything and just how we like kids can stay caught up depending on how much school they missed.*

Students admitted to not always keeping up with their homework, but learned from those teachers who upheld the rigor in their curriculum and maintained it in flexible, creative ways. As one student put it,

*They don't push you as much which is nice, so you have a little bit of leeway; but they bring it up every so often to let you know that you're still missing it or you can turn it in still or we can arrange a time to get help for yourself.*

Teachers provided extra time for individualized assistance during lunch and after school to students needing to complete assignments or help learning the material. Students did not always use this extra assistance and sometimes the teachers required their attendance during these times, if they saw the students falling behind.

Studies showed that teachers that demonstrated qualities such as flexibility, ability to understand student's point of view, experimentation, stimulation of student involvement in discussions, and encouragement were motivating to students (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Strong et al., 1995). In turn, these qualities allowed students to feel cared for and supported by their teachers, which increased school engagement (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Wentzel, 1997).

*Overwhelming.* This was another prevalent theme that came out in the interviews as students reflected on their transition to high school. Students responded,

*I took so many classes that it was overwhelming.*

Those students taking a full load of classes expressed being overwhelmed. The amount of homework and the level of difficulty in some classes increased. One student remarked,

*I think it's math....I have trouble focusing, like, on what he teaches....I don't understand it all, but it's like complicated.*

Other students shared this sentiment, “too much to handle,” for more personal reasons.

One shared how her brother’s severe injuries from an accident impacted her. Another student had to go with her sick mother to the hospital frequently and she in turn had gotten sick as well. Yet another student disclosed that her grades had dropped because of personal issues from the past were resurfacing. One respondent summarized it best,

*'Cause if there's something going on at home, they won't be able to concentrate very well at school. I learned this the hard way.*

Those students I interviewed showed a decline in their grades from first semester to second semester citing those reasons previously mentioned. But it was not for a lack of trying.

*Trying to focus on school work.* Students showed signs of increased self-efficacy and self-regulation by employing strategies to clarify obstacles that clutter their learning, setting more challenging goals, spending more energy on tasks, and persisting when faced with obstacles of failure. For example,

*Trying to focus on school work this week. Instead of going home, hanging out with friends, watching TV or playing video games, I've been going home and doing my homework.*

*It's [Freshman Academy] making a difference. I think I wouldn't be...I wouldn't understand things as much as I do now.*

A majority of the respondents said that they were working to bring their grades up before the end of the semester. One student shared that she had earned the “Scholar of the Month” Award from her Freshman Academy teachers for her improvements during second semester.

Students recognized that learning took place in classrooms where teachers integrated interesting material with different instructional strategies and assessments and provided the necessary support for the challenging curriculum. All students interviewed discussed those Freshman Academy teachers that actively engaged them in learning. These teachers made themselves available to students to discuss not only academic-related issues but also family and personal difficulties. Students recognized the high expectations held by their Freshman Academy teachers. Despite prior histories of cutting class and poor grades, the Freshman Academy teachers encouraged students to complete assignments and to go to class.

Learning mattered and authenticity added value, but was that enough when it came to academic achievement? The students interviewed acknowledged that their future success was connected to their academic achievement—

*I do like school because it gives me an education. When I graduate from high school, I get my diploma—*

but that was not enough to ensure cognitive engagement and academic achievement as evidenced by their GPAs. Yet, Klem and Connell (2004) and others concluded that

engagement is directly linked to student achievement. “Whether examining academic performance or involvement with a range of health behaviors, young people who feel connected to school, that they belong, and that teachers are supportive and treat them fairly, do better” (Libbey, 2004, p. 282).

In the next section I examined the improvements which could be made to the Freshman Academy as articulated by the respondents.

### *Research Question #3*

According to students, what improvements could be made to the Freshman Academy program?

According to the students, the impact that the Freshman Academy had on their lives was far-reaching. When asked what improvements they felt should be made to the Freshman Academy, two students acknowledged that no improvements were necessary:

*I don't think there's anything they need to improve.  
They just need to leave it like that. Don't do anything.*

The other four students articulated their recommendations for the Freshman Academy program in the areas of environment, teacher-student relationships, and curriculum and instruction.

#### *Environment*

Students' responses to the environment included the promotion of the program, structured environment, and size of the program.

*I am in the Freshman Academy. Am I a bad kid?... Is it a dark and scary place?... They think it's like all of the stoners and druggies and murderer people.... I'm going to get killed down there.*

One of the students felt the promotion of the Freshman Academy needed to be more positive, and students in the high school need to be more informed about the Freshman Academy. During the student's freshman orientation tour, the Link Crew [a high school transition program that welcomes freshman and makes them feel comfortable throughout their first year of high school (Boomerang Project, 2008)] student leader in the high school made a remark that the Freshman Academy was for "bad kids." The Freshman Academy student wondered if she was one. Before bringing some of her non-academy friends to the Freshman Academy area, they thought it was a scary place to go and thought that the Freshman Academy was a place for bad people. To dispel this seemingly popular misconception, all stakeholders in the school need to be made more aware of what the Freshman Academy is all about, promote the positives, and show that the Freshman Academy is not a place for "bad kids." This student is actively getting involved in changing that perception by applying next year to be a Link Crew student leader in the high school.

Another student commented on the need for a more structured environment:

*I do like a structured environment. I do, but I don't.... Structures and reminders are very good for kids who have learning disabilities or some sort of mental disabilities.... I basically need a structured environment; otherwise, things are gonna go to heck bad really fast.... Back like when we were in elementary school, where you knew exactly what you're doing from day to day. Now, in high school you get surprised with everything!*

She went on to say that students with learning disabilities need to have a more structured environment to help them succeed. Having learning disabilities herself, she mentioned, as part of that structure, the need for a class syllabus or assignment sheet. Then, students

will know what projects are going to be assigned, along with homework assignments, and their due dates. In the article, “The Silent Epidemic,” students reported

When asked what their high schools could have done to help more students stay in school, three out of the six leading answers related to too much freedom and not enough order and safety—68 percent cited “keeping students from skipping classes,” 62 percent “maintain classroom discipline,” and 57 percent “helping students feel safe from violence” (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 9).

There have been studies showing that warm and supportive yet structured classrooms with high expectations from the teachers are associated with high motivation and academic achievement (Wentzel, 1997; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Lastly, one student remarked that the program should be larger with some constraints.

*I like it to be like a larger program where it is not just part of the school. It is like the entire school...more students can get into it...the whole comfort thing...with the teachers personalized...where students can open up and express themselves.... and still academically get your stuff done.*

The interviewee perceived that other students could benefit from the comfortable, personalized environment and small community that has been created in the Freshman Academy—with the couches in the open area and the student run store, where students feel they can get more personal with teachers and teachers want to be more personal with them, and support to get your class work done at school. In the publication, *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution* (1996), the NASSP recommends,

Each high school should try to limit its enrollment to self-operating units of no more than 600 students.... Smallness of scale can be created in many ways...house plans and cluster programs...a schedule with fewer class changes lets students spend a longer time with the same students and the same teachers. An organizational approach that produces some kind of school-within-a-school

moves toward combating the bigness that shrouds so many youngsters in a cloak of anonymity (p. 46).

### *Teacher-Student Relationships*

Student comments focused on teachers showing more care:

*More respect in the classroom for those students...by being more understanding of what's going on.*

In further describing their relationships with teachers, respondents pointed to a significant perceived aspect of the Freshman Academy's teaching community. Showing more respect, more understanding of what is going on in students' lives outside of school was a prevalent theme. Students emphasized that such traits were not characteristic of all Freshman Academy teachers but were reflective of a couple. As previously mentioned, there are a couple of effective teachers in the Freshman Academy that have had a more positive impact on students' lives. When the students felt more valued and supported, they were more likely to engage in classroom activities (Wentzel, 1997). In *Breaking Ranks II* (2004), the NASSP calls for a more personalized experience in high schools,

The presumed need to build relationships rests on the premise that many students require a supportive relationship...with someone at the school who understands them personally. These are not independent "silos" that can be filled when we see fit. Learning is not the highest of priorities when a student's parent loses a job, has health problems, or there are stresses related to divorce, or when a student is homeless, or a student doesn't get invited to a dance or party, or a student did not make the cut for the band, the play, or the soccer team. While differing in their level of importance to you and me, each of these is at any given moment, potentially much more important to a student than learning. Our challenge is to insure that the issue is appropriately confronted so that learning can again become a priority (p. 68-69).

## *Curriculum and Instruction*

Student comments focused on making the classes more fun:

*Usually we just sit there and do math for like an hour and a half and that's really boring.... But, sometimes like he'll have us do this math assignment called the walk-around, where we walk around the math room and answer these questions and that's fun because we get to interact with people and stuff.... We have to think about the problems together.*

Besides becoming more involved in their students' lives, the respondents urged teachers to also take responsibility for making classes more engaging. One student, when asked why he skipped a class, responded that the class was boring. Respondents described social aspects of classrooms that they identified as effective: interesting, interactive, and cooperative-oriented. Students consistently reported that they enjoyed classes where teachers incorporated fun and interesting materials, teaching strategies, and activities.

*It's just like the math because like—excuse me—for the past couple of days, it's been really boring like the math teacher hasn't been putting in a lot of effort. You know what I mean? Like at the beginning of it—well, not the beginning—like we went through like, the first semester and then the second one, at the beginning of the second semester they started doing this thing called the Freshman Academy relays, where every morning before class, we do some type of exercise. Like, they would have us go outside and race. Or like um, play this math game. It was really fun. But like, they haven't done it for a really long time.*

Students discussed wanting teachers to more actively engage them in their learning—whether it be through projects, activities or discussions—rather than relegating them to some boring, individual seatwork. Research from Daniels & Arapostathis (2005) and others shows that “when teachers plan learning activities that are challenging and provide students with opportunities to learn the skills necessary for success, they create motivating learning environments and make it more likely that students will engage and

find happiness” (p. 50). Ames (1992), also, supports the findings that certain characteristics of classroom tasks “foster a willingness in students to put forth effort and become actively engaged in learning” (p. 263).

The final chapter prior to concluding includes limitations of this study, implications, suggestions from students, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the Freshman Academy at Smallville High School as it existed after four years of implementation. In the study I documented behaviors, feelings, attitudes, and opinions of the students in the Freshman Academy. Also, I gathered data pertaining to attendance, achievement, and school engagement. Using engagement as a measure of learning provided a much deeper understanding than just test scores or GPAs. Outside studies have shown that one way to improve learning is through increasing student engagement. While engagement has been tied to positive outcomes, research continues to find ways in which to increase engagement in the classroom.

The accuracy of my information depended on the reliability of my sources. My analysis came from survey data, archival data, and interviews. “When researchers select a sample from a population, certain factors may limit a survey researcher’s ability to draw valid inferences from the sample to the population” (Creswell, 2005, p. 359). Due to the small sample size, there may have been sampling error; thus, the participants may not have been representative of the entire population or reflected the population’s attitudes, beliefs, practices, and trends. Since the researcher used a convenience sample, claims about generalizing the results to all students is suspect (Creswell, 2005).

In the interviews the participants were comfortable with the researcher in sharing their opinions and views. During the interviews there was the risk that the researcher may

have prejudiced participant responses, knowingly or not, through comments and body language (Creswell, 2005). I attempted to neutralize any researcher bias.

### Limitations of the Study

Discrepancies between survey results and findings from the interviews may be two-fold. First, since the survey was given so close to the beginning of the year and again at the very end, the survey instrument may be too affected by the time of year. Students are more excited and energetic at the beginning of the year and may be more naturally engaged. They want to follow the rules, adhere to classroom norms, and avoid discipline referrals and becoming truant (Finn, 1993; Finn et al., 1995; Finn & Rock, 1997; Fredricks et al., 2004). Many are eager to participate in their learning activities including paying attention, asking questions, concentrating, giving effort, and being persistent (Finn et al., 1995; Fredricks, et al., 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). At the end of the year, students are ready to be finished with school and more naturally disengaged. Suffice it to say, engagement levels at the beginning of the school year are higher than at the end of the year. “Prior research of school engagement suggests that school engagement declines at the three-quarter mark (approximately the 27th week) of any given school year” (Capstick, 2007, p. 138). It would prove interesting to administer the student survey again in the fall of their tenth-grade year to see if their school engagement levels increased in determining if engagement levels truly are higher at the beginning of the school year.

Secondly, it is unlikely that one instrument is able to comprehensively assess school engagement on all of the constructs. When exploring school engagement, other engagement tools might render different outcomes. Also, it is possible that the questions

in the survey were not really getting at the construct of engagement. The results may not have shown significant differences on the areas of engagement because they share overlapping qualities, which poses to be problematic when trying to differentiate constructs and improve conceptual clarity. Since the multi-dimensional elements of engagement are interrelated, and often interdependent (Ainley et al., 2005), it is difficult to separate them completely. Consequently, some of the questions on the survey may address more than one area of school engagement. Whereas, the interviews were able to get at the true construct of school engagement. From the interview data, I derived other possible questions assessing school engagement that could be added to the Student Survey on School Engagement:

- I attend class regularly.
- I actively participate in class discussions.
- I participate in extra-curricular activities.
- The things I am learning in school are relevant to me.
- I feel challenged by my schoolwork.
- My teacher provides opportunities for me to explore topics of my own interest.
- I feel safe in my school.
- I feel like I belong in my school.
- I feel comfortable with being myself in class.

Other forms of data collection such as teacher interviews and classroom observations would have proved useful as well. This is why I felt it was important to use a mixed method in my study.

Although my sample was not generalizable, the current study suggested that it was possible to help reluctant learners engage in school if teachers are willing to listen to what their students have to say. At-risk students can and must be reached. In order to be effective in reaching these students, we must listen to their views, life and school experiences, concerns, and ideas for reform—so we might help others in the future.

#### Implications

Quantitative results of this study indicated that the Freshman Academy did not have an impact on school engagement and academic achievement, but had a significant impact on attendance. Results from the current study indicated that school engagement declined as the school year progressed, but academic achievement saw no change. Even though the results from the current study showed that the Freshman Academy did not increase school engagement and academic achievement as predicted, it may have prevented these dependent variables from decreasing further.

This conclusion is supported by previous research. An outside study Alspaugh (1998) showed an achievement loss associated with the transition to high school at the ninth grade. The combined loss in achievement across the four academic areas—reading, math, science, and social studies—for all schools during the transition to high school was statistically significant. Research suggests that in the ninth grade, there is a strong relationship between academic achievement and attendance (Roby, 2004). Truancy,

absenteeism, and eventually dropping out are all forms of nonparticipation in the academic process that may result in students not engaging in school (Finn et. al., 1995; Audas & Willms, 2001). With that being said, the reduction in truancies in this study may attribute to the prevention of further decline in school engagement and academic achievement. The findings of Capstick (2007) further support the results from this study on school engagement:

The ninth grade transition program did not increase school engagement. Results show that by the 27<sup>th</sup> week of school, all three school engagement scales showed a slight decrease, indicating that a one-semester ninth grade transition program may have not been adequate to increase school engagement but may have been adequate to prevent a greater decline in school engagement (p. 134).

Even though the quantitative data of the current study did not show the impact that the Freshman Academy had on school engagement, the qualitative data supported that the Freshman Academy does have an impact on school engagement.

From the perspectives of students, however, still little is known about what constitutes effective engagement in the classroom. “When students complain, ‘Teachers don’t care about me,’ are they voicing a need for a personal friend or, as the parenting literature might suggest, a need for more structure and guidance or perhaps more warmth and approval?” (Wentzel, 1997, p. 412). To gain more insight I conducted six student interviews. From the student interviews, the students commonly reported that the Freshman Academy was “like a family.” The respondents felt like the teachers cared about them in the Freshman Academy. The teachers showed the relevance of what they were teaching and used a variety of instructional strategies to maintain the interest of their students. The program and teachers provided for extra support for students that were still

struggling. The community meeting time and Mental Health Mondays offered an opportunity for all the teachers and students to engage in discussion of important issues facing teens. As a result the students reported that they had better attendance for their Freshman Academy classes than their non-academy classes.

Findings concur with the research literature of what constitutes engaging schools and teachers: rigor (cognitive), relevance (behavioral), and relationships (emotional).

They

promote students' understanding of what it takes to learn and confidence in their capacity to succeed in school by providing challenging instruction and support for meeting high standards, and by conveying high expectations for their students' success. They provide choices and they make curriculum and instruction relevant to adolescents' experiences, cultures, and long-term goals, so that students see some value in what they are doing in school. Finally, they promote a sense of belonging by personalizing instruction, showing an interest in students' lives, and creating a supportive, caring social context (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004, p. 212).

#### Students' Recommendations for Improvement

According to the students, the improvements that could be made to the Freshman Academy program included aspects of the environment, teacher-student relationship, and curriculum and instruction. Student responses about the environment included: a positive promotion of the program, a more structured environment, and increased size of the program. One student thought the program should be bigger so more students benefited from it, a ninth-grade house concept. Another student felt like the program was not being promoted in a positive light by other students in the high school and that students in the high school needed to be better educated about the Freshman Academy program. One student commented that there was a need for more structure in areas of the program. One

area especially mentioned was a course syllabus or assignment sheet so students could stay better organized.

The teacher-student relationship was important to the students in the Freshman Academy. Showing more respect, more understanding of what is going on in students' lives outside of school was a prevalent theme. Students emphasized that such traits were not characteristic of all Freshman Academy teachers but were reflective of a couple. Besides becoming more involved in their students' lives, teachers needed to also take responsibility for making classes more engaging. The students liked to do more hands-on activities and projects. Regardless, the tone of nearly all the student interviews was optimism that the Freshman Academy was providing them a good education and that now they were more positive about their futures.

#### Recommendations for Future Study

The current study did not address all the questions regarding the relationship of Freshman Academies and school engagement, academic achievement, and attendance. Several suggestions for further research did evolve.

- As the student interview data showed, students were more engaged in certain classes. The student engagement survey could have been provided to all students in each of their classes to see which teachers and classes are more engaging.
- Compare school engagement, academic achievement, and attendance of the Freshman Academy students by gender and ethnicity.
- Engage sixth-grade and ninth-grade students in similar conversation to see if there are common elements among students' transition experiences.

- Repeat this study in more than one location utilizing a greater number of Freshman Academies in Colorado or across the country and compare the results.
- Delve more into the needs of the disengaged population of high school students.
- Examine other Freshman Academies to see if class size makes a difference in school engagement, academic achievement, and attendance for the at-risk population.
- Utilize other design methods to research the construct of school engagement.
- Interview teachers to see if they report the same levels of engagement that the students self-reported.
- Conduct longitudinal studies on Freshman Academy students to see the long-term effects the program has had on students' school engagement, academic achievement, attendance, and graduation.
- Administer the Student Survey on School Engagement three times instead of twice, fall and spring of ninth grade and again fall of tenth grade, to see if engagement levels really are higher at the beginning of the school year.
- Since some schools involve their entire ninth-grade student population and not just those identified as at risk in their Freshman Academy, a study of the impact of this concept on school engagement, academic achievement, and attendance would prove worthy.

## Concluding Statements

Daunting but doable, all students should experience school success. With a collaborative effort by all stakeholders, it can happen. Tapping student experiences is essential as a research tool to inform reform planning. Including the student voice in the discussion about what must be done to improve high schools, especially the transition year, and to prepare struggling, at-risk students for successful futures is important.

What is needed of schools today is an effort to make school more relevant to at-risk students, to provide individual attention needed, to have high expectations for them, and to address their needs to keep them engaged in school. Educators need to be attuned to the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive demands of the curricular activities within the context of the developmental needs of the students. There is a body of literature that reveals that

determining student interests in curricular topics and themes; encouraging participation in schoolwide teams or councils; and creating greater support services to meet social, cultural, and academic needs are all important elements toward fostering a school culture that empowers students (Lee, 1999, p. 215).

The best possible learning environments for students are caring, supportive, and challenging. Research on school interventions suggests that improving the school climate is not itself enough to improve learning (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004). Teachers must also establish clear expectations for their students regarding classroom behavior; showing respect toward the school, staff, and students; working with others; taking responsibility for attending class; completing assignments; performing to the best of one's abilities; and seeking support when they fail to understand

what is being taught. Students are more likely to be engaged where they feel comfortable, accepted, and challenged. Likewise, the school needs to consider the curricular, relational, and environmental recommendations of the students. Failure to address these recommendations could further limit opportunities for meaningful learning for all students.

Concluding this study, one of the Freshman Academy teachers shared these final thoughts with me:

You know, Tracy, as I look at the GPAs alone, the numbers look shitty, but what the numbers don't tell is each of these kid's individual story. When I couple their story and the obstacles they are dealing with and trying to overcome, I am so impressed with these kids. It horrifies me to consider what would happen to these kids without FA [Freshman Academy]—without people like you. These numbers are great for reflection—what we have done well, what we deserve to celebrate, and what we need to work on. I wish I had the time to tell you about each of these kids and what they have dealt with this year. These are just 60 kids of a population we are missing everyday at [Smallville High School]. Much work to be done!  
(personal communication, June 4, 2008)

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APPENDIX A

Smallville HS Student Interview Questions

Name:

School:

Date:

Describe yourself as a student.

What are some positive things about school?

What hasn't worked well for you at school?

Tell me about your life (home, social, etc.).

Have you been in trouble in school this year? Explain.

What are your grades right now in all your classes?

Interviewed by \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

Comments:

\_\_\_\_\_ SPED \_\_\_\_\_ ESL \_\_\_\_\_ 504 \_\_\_\_\_ ILP \_\_\_\_\_ other:

## APPENDIX B

### Student Survey on School Engagement



**NCSE** | National Center for School Engagement

Student ID Number: _____
Date completed: _____
School: _____
Age: _____ Grade: _____ Boy or Girl (circle one)

We would like to find out a little more about you and how you feel about school. Your answers to the following questions will help us to do this. It will take you about 15 minutes to complete this survey. If you are unsure of how to answer a question, please answer it as best you can and then write a comment in the margin. All the information you provide is confidential. It will only be used to help us learn about how to keep children interested in completing school.

1. Your ethnicity (please check all that apply):       White/Anglo     African American  
 Hispanic/Latino     American Indian       Asian/Pacific Islander  
 Other, describe \_\_\_\_\_
2. Your primary language: \_\_\_\_\_ Second language: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>3. How much do you agree with each of the following statements?</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
I come to class prepared.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I treat my classmates with respect.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I complete my work on time.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I treat my teachers with respect.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I follow the rules at school.	①	②	③	④	⑤

<b>4. How often are the following statements true for you?</b>	<b>Never/ Almost Never</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Always/ Almost Always</b>
I feel excited by the work in school.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I am interested in the work I get to do in my classes.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I talk with people outside of school about what I am learning.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I check my schoolwork for mistakes.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I learn a lot from my classes.	①	②	③	④	⑤
<b>5. How often are the following statements true for you?</b>	<b>Never/ Almost Never</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Always/ Almost Always</b>
I enjoy the work I do in class.	①	②	③	④	⑤
I feel I can go to my teachers with the things that I need to talk about.	①	②	③	④	⑤
My classroom is a fun place to be.	①	②	③	④	⑤
Most of my teachers praise me when I work hard.	①	②	③	④	⑤
Most of my teachers understand me.	①	②	③	④	⑤

This survey (study, etc.) was approved by the University of Denver's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research on July 10, 2007.

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY!

## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent – Freshman Academy: Making the Transition to High School

Your child is invited to participate in a study that will research the level of school engagement, academic achievement and attendance of ninth-grade students. The study is being conducted at the University of Denver by Tracy Srofe, doctoral student in the College of Education. The results of the study will be used to learn more about students' level of school engagement when involved in the freshman academy. The project is being supervised by Dr. Marty Tombari, College of Education, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208, (303) 871-2575, [mtombari@colorado foundation.org](mailto:mtombari@colorado foundation.org).

The survey will take your child 15 minutes to complete. Your child's participation will involve responding to a number of questions about school engagement on the following: relationships between student and teacher as well as student and peers, attitudes toward school attendance and discipline, school involvement, academic achievement, and school climate. Your child's involvement is completely voluntary. In addition, your child may want to volunteer to participate in the interview which will take about 30 minutes and will involve answering questions about individual's opinions and attitudes about school and the freshman academy. The risks associated with this project are minimal. If, however, your child experiences discomfort your child may discontinue his or her participation at any time. We respect your child's right to choose not to answer any questions that may make him or her feel uncomfortable. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. Your child may choose not to answer any question during the interview and are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

The researcher will treat all information gathered for this study as confidential. This means that only the researcher will have access to the information your child provides. A separate identification number will be used on all paperwork in this study. Only the researcher will have the list that matches this number with your child's individual student identification number provided by the school, and this list along with the student surveys and audio tapes of interviews will be kept in a secure setting in a locked filing cabinet. In addition, when the researcher reports information for the study, it will be reported for the entire group of subjects, never for any one individual. It will use only group averages and paraphrased wording.

Although this research does not address the following, I am required to inform you that there are two exceptions to the promise of confidentiality. Any information your child reveals concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect is required by law to be reported to the proper authorities. In addition, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena.

The benefits of being involved in this study include helping your child's high school and others in implementing a freshman academy or improving existing ones to help ninth graders in making the transition to high school. Your child may also enjoy the ability to provide information about his or her own experiences. If you would like a copy of the results of the study, the researcher will be happy to provide one for you. Your child will, however, receive no compensation for participation in the project. Potential risks for your child being involved include the possibility that discussing individual's opinions and attitudes towards school and the freshman academy may be upsetting. If this occurs, the researcher will discontinue questioning and arrange for supportive care from staff at Littleton High School.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how your child was treated during the research sessions, please contact Dr. Dennis Wittmer, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at (303) 871-2431 or Sylk Sotto-Santiago, Office of Sponsored Programs at (303) 871-4052 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121. This consent (survey, study, etc.) was approved by the University of Denver's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research on July 10, 2007. If you would like to inspect the student survey, a copy is on file in the principal's office at Littleton High School. You may keep this page for your records.

Please sign below if you understand and give permission for your child to participate in the **student survey**.

I have read and understood the foregoing descriptions of the study called Freshman Academy: Making the High School Transition. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I give permission for my child to participate in this study and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of the consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Student Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

By signing below, you give permission for your child to participate in an **interview** and allow all the data from the interview to be used in the study described above.

I give permission to have my child audio taped.

I do not give permission to have my child audio taped.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Student Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_ I would like a summary of the results of this study to be mailed to me at the following postal or e-mail address:

APPENDIX D

Youth Assent Form

Research Project: Freshman Academy: Making the Transition to High School

We would like to find out a little more about you and how you feel about school. You are invited to participate in a study that will research the level of school engagement, academic achievement and attendance of ninth-grade students. The researcher, Tracy Srofe, is a doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of Denver.

The survey will take about 15 minutes to complete. Participation will involve answering questions about school engagement on the following: relationships between student and teacher as well as student and peers, attitudes toward school attendance and discipline, school involvement, grades, and school climate. Your involvement is completely voluntary. In addition, you may want to volunteer to participate in the interview which will take about 30 minutes and will involve answering questions about your opinions and attitudes about school. We respect your right to choose not to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable. You may choose not to answer any question during the interview and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

You may keep the top of the page for your records. Tear off the bottom of the page along the dotted line and return to your counselor.

-----  
Please sign below if you understand and are willing to participate in this study.

I have read and understood the descriptions of the study called Freshman Academy: Making the High School Transition. I have asked for and received explanation of any thing that I did not understand. I agree to participate in the **student survey** and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of the Youth Assent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Student Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

By signing below, you agree to also participate in an **interview** and allow all the data from the interview to be used in the study described above.

I agree to be audio taped.

I do not agree to be audio taped.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Student Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX E

### Student Interview Guide

Instructions to students: This study and interview was approved by the University of Denver's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research on July 10, 2007. During the next 30 minutes I am going to ask you a series of questions regarding your opinions and attitude towards school and the freshman academy. Your name will not be recorded during this interview and group data only will be used in the final report. The individual information you provide during this interview will not be shown to any one else. The risks associated with this project are minimal. If, however, you experience discomfort you may discontinue your participation at any time. I respect your right to choose not to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. You may choose not to answer any question during the interview and are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Gender: M F

Date:

Tell me about yourself.

Do you play any sports or involved in any other clubs/extra-curricular activities?

Do you like school?

Do you like your teachers? Explain.

Is the classwork fun and interesting?

Do you feel close to the students and teachers in the freshman academy?

What are some things you liked about the freshman academy?

What are some things that you would improve about the freshman academy?

Did you have good attendance this year?

Did you get in trouble at school this year? Explain.

What kind of grades did you get in your classes this year?