CULTIVATING A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION – IMPACT OF A COHORT-STYLE TRANSITION PROGRAM ON NINTH-GRADE STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN PLACED AT-RISK

by

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(Under the Direction of Sheneka Williams)

ABSTRACT

This case study analyzed the implementation of a cohort-style transition program aimed at improving the transition to high-school for students who have been placed at-risk by creating a learning environment more conducive to meeting each student’s individual needs. Research questions focused on understanding the extent to which the cohort structure impacted the learning environment for students who have been placed at-risk, evaluating the program’s impact on attendance, behavior, and academic achievement trends, and identifying how participating in an action research team affects the implementation of an intervention. This study employed action research through the facilitation of focus group sessions, examination of Likert-Scale and open-ended survey questions, and analysis of attendance, behavior, and academic achievement trends. Findings indicate the following: a cohort-style transition program might have a positive impact on the academic components of the learning environment but could lead to a higher frequency of non-academic issues; a cohort-style transition program might have a positive impact on academic achievement and attendance for students who have been placed at-risk; and participating in an action research team may allow team members the ability to identify and
employ changes during implementation, resulting in a stronger intervention. Future research studies should consider conducting a longitudinal study, replicating this study while incorporating a student feedback component, and integrating more peer support activities.

INDEX WORDS: Action Research, High School Transition, At-Risk Population, Ninth-Grade Academy, Transition Programming
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DEDICATION

To

Sara Anne Archambeau
My wife and best friend

Without your love, encouragement and support, this would not have been possible. Thank you for being the rock of our family and motivating me throughout this entire process. You inspire me in ways that you may never realize.

and

Zachary Douglas and Elizabeth Grace
My son and daughter
You both are the lights of my life. I am so proud of the people you are growing into. You both inspire me to be the best father, and person, I can possibly be.

and

Bradford Archambeau and Patricia Marie Archambeau
My father and mother

Thank you for always believing in me and showing me that hard work truly does pay off.

and

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Thank you for supporting me through good times and bad. Without your support I would not be where I am today, personally and professionally.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I began the doctoral program after completing seven years as a public educator at four different high schools, in four very diverse neighborhoods. My role in the classroom at each of the four schools brought me to work with students from a wide variety of backgrounds. Through years of interactions with these students from all walks of life, I began to see that, regardless of their differences, a commonality existed between many of them. That commonality, difficulty making the transition from middle- to high-school, is what drove me to conduct this research study and evaluate transition programming at the high school level.

Overview of the Case

Jefferson High School\(^1\) is a public secondary school located in a suburb of a major city in the Southeastern United States. Jefferson is one of five traditional public high schools in Lake County School District\(^1\); a rapidly-growing school district with three new high schools opening in the next five years. While Lake County is considered a rapidly-growing district, it is small when compared to its local counterparts. Demographically, Lake County Public Schools contains over 46,000 students with 68% White students, 13% Asian students, 13% Hispanic students, 3% African-American students, and less than 3% Multi-Race, Pacific-Islander, and American-Indian students. District wide, 17% of students in Lake County Schools are eligible for free and reduced lunch.

\(^1\) Names provided are pseudonyms
Jefferson High School’s structure is similar to that of a traditional high school, whereas the enrolled grade levels range from ninth-grade through twelfth-grade. As a result of the growing population in Lake County, Jefferson High School’s enrollment has increased from 2,300 students in 2015 to approximately 2,700 students in 2017. Even though enrollment has increased, the demographics at Jefferson have not changed much as the majority of its student population is White. Jefferson High School is considered by many to be a high-performing school due to a 92.6% graduation rate for the 2017 school year. In addition, 45% of Jefferson’s student population completed an Advanced Placement (AP) exam, with 78% of the AP student population earning a three, four, or five on the AP exam.

While achievement levels have remained steady at Jefferson High School, stakeholders in the community have stated that Jefferson’s students often feel lost in such a large school setting. Feedback from the community, in conjunction with the rapid increase in enrollment, has caused the leaders at Jefferson to evaluate ways to make the school feel smaller. Popular initiatives have been discussed, including academic and ninth-grade academies, but no plans had been implemented as of the 2017 school year.

**Problem Statement**

The transition from middle to high school presents many challenges for students, including increased academic expectations with reduced student support, summer learning loss, and often times difficult social transitions. That first year of high school is often identified as a “bottleneck,” as students who fail to earn the proper number of credits do not promote to tenth-grade and thus, demonstrate a risk of dropping out of school before their graduation. The bottleneck is a result of students failing to make academic progress during the first year of high school, which limits the courses they can take during the subsequent school years. These students
are unable to access more advanced courses and are enrolled into repeat-courses or remedial courses. Ultimately, this issue creates a predicament for students in which the passage of time in high school leads to inadequately making sufficient progress, or getting off track, toward graduation. In fact, students who fail to make a smooth transition to high school, dropout as early as the end of the ninth-grade (Cooper & Liou, 2007). As a result, researchers target ninth-grade as the make or break year for students.

Ninth-grade students attending Jefferson High School have generally performed well in the classroom and on standardized tests, thus advancing through each grade level as expected. However, there is one student population that has seen a decline in their overall success rate over the past few years, students identified as at-risk.

![Figure 1. Ninth-Grade Course Failures at Jefferson](chart_image.png)

How is a student classified as at-risk? Sloat, Audas, and Williams (2007) define a student as being at-risk if their “school achievement, progress toward graduation, or preparation for employment are in serious jeopardy” (p. 460). In order to properly identify students who have
been placed at risk, and identify them early in their educational career, Lake County Public School District implements a multi-step approach. The first step in the at-risk identification process is analyzing standardized testing data for incoming ninth-grade students. Lake County maintains an internal database of standardized testing results for all of its students, entitled Class Profiles 2.1, which affords Lake County employees the ability to identify students who demonstrate a history of poor performance on standardized tests. Students whose scores consistently fall into the “Does Not Meet the Standard” range on the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) or the “Beginning Learner” range on the End-of-Course Milestones Test (EOCT) are identified as potentially at-risk and needing further analysis.

After identifying potential at-risk students through testing data, the next step is to examine which of the Early Warning Indicators (EWI) exist for each student. This is done through the use of the Student Risk Assessment (Appendix B) found in Class Profiles 2.1. During their first year of high school, students identified as at-risk typically earn lower than average scores on standardized tests, exhibit poor classroom academic performance, have poor attendance, and have behavior issues. As a result, some of these at-risk students fail to accrue the proper amount of academic credit and earn promotion to tenth-grade.

To help at-risk students recover credits they did not earn during their freshman year, Lake County Schools offers a variety of credit-recovery programs. The first option for students needing credit recovery is an online-based program called APEX. APEX is typically reserved for students in twelfth-grade and is not available to every student due to scheduling limitations. As an alternative, students also have the opportunity to re-take courses during the summer term. Summer school can be costly and there are no scholarships available for families who cannot afford the fees. In addition to the programs stated above, Lake County School District also has
two alternative schools for which students can apply to attend. These two alternative schools focus on assisting students in recovering the credits they need for graduation. The enrollment capacity is limited and students from other districts can apply to attend, so there are a number of students that are left to find other means of support.

While these support programs provide a lot of benefits to those who participate, a disadvantage of the aforementioned programs is the fact that they are built upon being reactive and are focused solely on providing credit recovery rather than academic support. The recovery programs are not meant to be long-term support for struggling students. Students who have participated in the programs have proven to achieve short-term academic success due to the programs being web-based and self-paced. However, once students get caught up on their academic credits and exit one of the aforementioned programs, the tendency is for the students to fall back into their old ways. Therefore, a study to investigate this issue was in order.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this action research case study is to use Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to inform the implementation of a cohort-style transition program for at-risk ninth grade students and analyze its effectiveness in preparing students for academic success. Three research questions guiding this study were the following:

1. To what extent does a cohort-style transition program impact the learning environment for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk?

2. What trends in behavior, attendance, and academic achievement are observed in ninth-grade students placed at-risk who participate in a cohort-style transition program as compared to those who do not participate?
3. How does one's participation in an action research team affect the implementation of a transition program for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk?

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study, as illustrated in Figure 2, helped steer the action research process. In order to help students transition to high school with more ease, the team will attempt to develop a solution which provides students with a more personalized learning environment, a combination of peer and teacher support, and a comfortable social setting.

*Figure 2. Conceptual Framework*

Personalized learning environments are built with a purpose using pedagogy, curriculum, and the physical layout of the classroom in order to meet the individual student’s needs. The learning experience is tailored to learning preferences and the specific interests of each learner.
In a personalized learning environment, the learning objectives and content, as well as the method and pace, vary depending on the student.

Research shows that teachers are an integral source of influence on students as they transition from middle school to high school (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Teachers can communicate a sense of caring, respect, and appreciation for their students that can promote development, engagement and achievement. Equally as important is the interaction that students have with their peers. Peer support fulfills the need for friendship and helps students develop a sense of satisfaction with school (Kennally & Monrad, 2007). That said, these different sources of support do not seem to influence students in the same way (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Therefore, a proper combination of peer and teacher support could provide students with the greatest benefit.

Students entering high school generally feel overwhelmed, irrelevant, and anonymous (Smith et al., 2006; Mizelle, 2005). Providing a smaller, more comfortable social setting can help ease the anxiety many students feel as they begin ninth grade. Ultimately, to provide an improved transition experience at Jefferson High School, the action research team will investigate interventions that incorporate the three factors stated above.

**Significance**

This action research case study has the potential to contribute to knowledge in a variety of contexts and areas. Through the action research process, the team worked to develop interventions which addressed the issues that students encounter as they transition from middle-to high-school. Additionally, leaders and teachers at Jefferson became better educated as to how some ninth-grade students perceive the transition to high school and how they have previously dealt with the hardships they faced. Consequently, the knowledge gained from this study could
lead to the development of school-wide strategies which create a better transition experience for all ninth-grade students.

While transition experiences may be improved at Jefferson, the issues students face as they transition from middle- to high school do not exist solely within this setting. The findings from this study could potentially contribute to the knowledge of educators outside of Jefferson High School. In schools across Lake County School District, many students encounter similar hardships as the students at Jefferson. The results from this study may encourage other high schools in Lake County to pursue new ways of providing support for their incoming ninth-grade students. Furthermore, schools outside of the Lake County School District could use the framework developed by the action research team to improve their students’ transition experience. Despite the fact that the study will be conducted at one school, there is no limit to the number of schools who could potentially benefit from the findings of the study. In short, the findings from this study may be transferable to another school setting.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter includes a review of literature introducing the issues students face as they transition from middle- to high-school. In an effort to understand how best to address these issues, this review examines empirical research, journals, articles, and books related to the struggles students face during high-school transition, the incorporation of academies at traditional high schools, and the implementation of unique transition programming. The understanding gained from the literature provides the theoretical grounding for this study. Literature related to the transition from middle- to high-school offers insight into the central difficulties rising ninth-grade students face as it pertains to attendance, discipline, and achievement, and offers suggestions for dealing with these issues through the implementation of transition programming. The chapter continues by providing examples as to how transition programming has previously been implemented at the high-school level while examining the reasons the programs were successful or not successful.

Transition Factors Plaguing Freshmen

The transition from middle school to high school forces students to experience a multitude of new things. As students enter the ninth grade, they encounter new environments, new curricula, new class organizations, and new teachers while simultaneously undergoing developmental changes themselves (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008; Wilcock, 2007). In addition, a heavy focus on testing in high school leads to higher expectations for students and an increase in the amount of time spent working on assignments away from the
classroom. Consequently, students may become overwhelmed as they have to make choices affecting their future; such as choosing courses, participating in extracurricular activities, and considering their post-secondary plans (Mizelle, 2005). To many ninth graders, these academic and social factors can cause the school to feel overwhelmingly large, unwelcoming, teacher-centered and overly competitive (Mizelle, 2005).

The impersonal nature of traditional high schools can have a lasting effect on student achievement. With many high school teachers encountering classroom sizes as large as thirty-five, students are not always afforded the opportunity to establish a strong relationship with their teacher, creating feelings of disbelief, isolation and disconnection (Neild, 2009). Developing and maintaining proper relationships with teachers is a key developmental need of adolescents (Eccles & Roeser, 2011) and prior research highlights teachers’ experience as influential for students’ academic success (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2009). Lack of a strong teacher-student relationship can have a major influence on a ninth grader’s academic performance and play a significant role in his/her future as a high school student (McIntosh et al., 2008). In addition, high student-to-teacher ratios create a situation in which students do not always receive the individual attention they are accustomed to receiving at the middle school level. In some cases, the lack of focused attention and individualized, personal instruction can deepen the feeling of seclusion and helplessness (Neild, 2009).

In addition to the academic factors stated above, student and parent motivation can impact whether or not a student’s transition from middle school to high school is successful (Wilcock, 2007). During the elementary school years, parents tend to be more actively engaged in their child’s education (Mizelle, 2005). However, as noted by Neild (2009), parental motivation and involvement decreases as students begin to progress through middle school and
high school. Parents of students who have made the transition expressed a feeling of intimidation and confusion when attempting to be involved with their student’s high school education, thus the lack of involvement (Neild, 2009; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Additionally, parents tend to see each transition, from elementary to middle and middle to high, as the next step in their child’s independence. Therefore, parents allow their child to make more decisions without parental influence. Neild (2009) found that students who are less supervised by their parents are significantly more influenced by their peers, leading to poor academic habits and inappropriate behavior that ultimately results in school disciplinary action.

Currently, it is not uncommon for eighth-grade students to scatter to a variety of public high schools and private schools. Neild (2009) found that ninth grade students, on average, attend high school with approximately sixty percent of their eighth-grade classmates. Therefore, a large number of ninth-graders are forced to develop new social relationships and adapt to the practices and routines of a new school. Neild (2009) suggests that some students are able to adapt to the more impersonal high school climate; whereas, some students do not adapt and end up feeling anonymous and alienated. These feelings could matriculate into negative self-images and low self-esteem (Mizelle, 2005). The negative self-perception, uncertainty and outsider-feeling that some students develop typically reveals themselves in weaker attendance, behavior problems, and poor academic performance (Neild, 2009; Mizelle, 2005; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Attendance, behavior and academic outcomes are often thought to be the most important indicators of short- and long-term student success (Neild, 2009).

**Attendance**

School attendance is an ongoing concern for parents and educators and understanding the importance of being present at school is critical when attempting to maximize student
achievement. On a national level, ninth-graders have the lowest grade point average, worst attendance, the majority of failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than any other high school grade level (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention developed categories linking absenteeism and risk factors for students in ninth grade (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2012). These categories include:

- **School factors:** The size and culture of the school, along with the attitudes of the staff, play a key role in a student’s decision to attend school.
- **Family factors:** The lack of parental supervision, socioeconomic status, substance abuse, and domestic violence can potentially affect a student’s attendance.
- **Economic factors:** Student employment status, parent employment status, and accessibility to affordable transportation affect student attendance from an economic perspective.
- **Student factors:** The student’s emotional and social competence, drive, and motivation can play a role in regard to attendance.

In high schools with large student populations, it can be difficult for teachers to comprehend the numerous issues freshmen can encounter. In *Perceptions of the Transition from Middle School to High School* (Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006), an attempt is made to gain further understanding as to how students felt about their transition to high school. One freshman participating in the study detailed his experience:

> When I started ninth grade I felt so alone. I cut every day, left classes early, came in late, really finding any way to avoid being at school….
some people have no problem just being another face in the crowd, but it made me feel like I did not exist (Smith et al., 2006, p. 6). Student attendance has long been thought to be one of the important predictors of student success (Neild, 2009). Therefore, an attempt must be made by employees at high schools to recognize erratic attendance patterns and intervene before larger problems occur.

Social anxiety and feelings of isolation are only a few of the reasons students are absent from class. Research has shown that students are also commonly absent from school in order to avoid assignments, such as tests and projects (Smith et al., 2006; Mizelle, 2005; Neild, 2009). This common practice is often referred to as work avoidance. According to Smith et al. (2006), work avoidance is most prevalent between the ages of 5 – 6 years old, 10 – 11 years old, and 13 – 18 years old. These three time periods correlate with important transitions students make during their educational career: enter elementary (ages 5 – 6), elementary to middle (ages 10 – 12), and middle to high (ages 14 – 16). It is also during the transition to high school that parental involvement decreases; thus, attendance at school becomes even more vital. A lack of parental involvement and increase in work avoidance can lead to students falling behind academically while absences accumulate. Consequently, academic struggles caused by truancy can lead to a greater risk of a student dropping out of school (Neild, 2009).

Allensworth and Easton (2007) conducted a study in which they tracked students who entered the ninth grade in Chicago Public Schools during the 2004 – 2005 school year and followed their academic progress through the 2006 – 2007 school year. During this study, the researchers attempted to find a correlation between the number of ninth grade student absences and the percent chance students had of graduating high school in four years. They found that students who were absent 0 – 4 days during their freshmen year were found to have an 87%
chance of graduating on time. As absences increased in increments of four, a twenty percent
decline in chance of graduating in four years occurred. The group with the lowest chance of
graduating in four years were students who missed 40 or more days during their freshmen year.
This group of students had a zero percent chance of graduating with their ninth-grade cohort
(Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

There could be a multitude of reasons for the dramatic decrease in graduation percentage
as absences increased. But, Allensworth and Easton (2007) found the most common reasons for
the decline in Chicago Public Schools were students not making up missed work, students’
absences being classified as unexcused, therefore, not having the ability to make up the work
they missed, and poor performance on major assignments due to a lack of presence in the
classroom. The findings presented by Allensworth and Easton (2007) helps to illustrate how
essential it is for students to be in school each day.

**Discipline**

Georgia Appleseed, a non-partisan not-for-profit organization devoted to law that serves
the public interest, conducted a study on school discipline in the state of Georgia between the
2004 and 2010 school years. The objective of the study was to assess the effectiveness of student
discipline processes in all of Georgia’s public-school systems. Findings showed that, over the
seven-year time frame, ninth grade discipline referrals accounted for more than 63% of the
statewide discipline referrals at the high school level (Georgia Appleseed, 2011). In comparison,
this was more than double any other grade level.

Referrals are not the only disciplinary action that stands out at the ninth-grade level.
Georgia Appleseed (2011) found that students in ninth grade were also assigned out-of-school
suspension (OSS) and expelled more often than students in any other grade level. As with
referrals, this figure was more than double any other grade level. According to Georgia Appleseed (2011), the trends of disciplinary action did not vary significantly over the seven years under review. Therefore, evidence shows that ninth grade is where the majority of disciplinary issues continually occur. The results outlined by Georgia Appleseed (2011) also illustrates the consistency of ninth grade discipline problems across both time and geographical distance.

Why do ninth grade students have such a difficult time engaging in proper behavior? McIntosh et al. (2008) identify feelings of alienation and disbelief as the first step to engaging in inappropriate behavior. Students who have difficulty experiencing positive social relationships cling onto any peer-to-peer interaction, regardless of whether the interaction is positive or negative (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). As Neild (2009) found, students who engage in inappropriate behavior are able to make easier connections with students who lack self-confidence. Reason for this is that, students who feel out of place start to feel as if they are a part of something, which results in the development of a relationship with these troubled students (Neild, 2009). While they might be engaging in behavior they know is inappropriate, the interaction with peers makes them feel good about themselves and the feelings of disbelief slowly fade away (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

Evidence also points to the different disciplinary approach taken by teachers and administrators at the high school level as compared to middle school (McIntosh et al., 2008). High schools were shown to have a stricter code of conduct and abide by it closely. On the other hand, middle schools were not as stringent (McIntosh et al., 2008). This creates a transition problem as ninth grade students must quickly adjust their behaviors to meet high school expectations (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Unfortunately, this can be difficult for some.
Students who are not able to make the adjustment spend more time in disciplinary situations; which causes them to miss classroom time and become a greater risk for developing academic problems (McIntosh et al., 2008; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

Achievement

The size and scope of traditional high schools can leave students searching for answers as they attempt to navigate their new environment. Neild (2009) suggests that middle school does not prepare all freshmen adequately. Some students may not receive the proper level of support from their teacher even though they are struggling academically. These struggling students continue to pass their middle school courses but fail to learn the basic skills necessary to succeed at the high school level (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Students lacking the necessary skills can become overwhelmed by the academic challenges of high school, leading them to doubt their abilities and experience an unsuccessful transition (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

Ninth grade students also suffer a natural achievement loss during their transition to high school (Neild, 2009). Achievement loss occurs for both high- and low-achieving students due to an increased level of rigor found in high school courses. In addition, the types of academic work students are required to complete can affect their ability to pay attention, their interests, and their morals and ethics (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Cohen and Smerdon (2009) identify two key aspects of academic work that are particularly important for ninth grade students: the content of the curriculum in terms of its relevance to the student and instructional practices which generate interest, meaningfulness, and challenge the student.

These characteristics vary in level of importance to each student, but their absence can contribute to achievement loss. Furthermore, achievement loss can be attributed to a natural decrease in level of engagement most ninth grade students experience during their first year of
high school (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). While the amount of achievement loss varies from student to student, the effect can be significant and lengthy.

**Current Transition Practices**

The transition from middle school to high school presents considerable challenges to students. Common thought is that students will naturally assimilate into their new environment, therefore schools generally do little to assist students in transitions. So, what do schools do for transitioning students? The three most common transition approaches are allowing students to tour their new school, conducting middle and high school educator meetings, and facilitating high school counselor meetings with educators at the middle school (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). Unfortunately, only one of these approaches directly involves students and occurs before the students officially enter high school.

Uvaas and McKevitt (2013) found that schools providing additional student supports reported higher student efficacy, higher student achievement, an increase in student retention, and a decrease in their dropout rates as compared to schools only providing the aforementioned minimal supports. Additional supports provided by schools in the study included teacher-student advisory periods, interdisciplinary teacher teaming, and additional academic tutoring (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Other effective transition supports provided by schools included students attending classes at the high school before transitioning, summer meetings between students and their high school teachers, and a student mentoring program during the fall semester to help students make the adjustment (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). The benefit to all these supports is the interaction incoming ninth grade students have with both peers and teachers. More frequent and positive interaction can lead to a sense of belonging rather than the feelings of doubt and disbelief some freshmen report (Haselden, Sanders, & Sturkie, 2012).
One high school in Georgia recently employed a unique program to help their ninth-grade students. The program requires all freshmen to be enrolled in a class called “High School 101.” During this class, students are taught skills that are essential for success in high school. Topics for High School 101 include time management, decision-making skills, study skills, test-taking strategies, social tolerance, computer research skills, and career alignment (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). Since the implementation of this course, ninth grade students have expressed a sense of calm and confidence (Haselden et al., 2012).

Some schools have decided to take a different approach to high school transition. Instead of simply providing supports, some schools have placed all ninth-grade students into a separate wing of the school building. Commonly called freshman academies, this type of structure affords ninth graders the opportunity to acclimate to high school before being blended with students from the upper grades (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Freshman academies can look different from one another, but they all have a similar goal of easing the transition to high school and increasing the number of successful ninth grade students (Haselden et al., 2012).

Many schools with freshman academies have reported great success (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). The structure of freshman academies allows each student to receive more individual attention, gives students an opportunity to make social connections in a smaller environment and can make the student population easier to manage for teachers and administrators (Haselden et al., 2012). According to Kennelly and Monrad (2007), some positives of freshman academies include improvements in attendance, a decrease in discipline referrals, higher teacher morale and more involved parents. One high school conducted a data analysis to compare previously enrolled freshmen who did not participate in their freshman academy with freshmen who did. This school found that their freshmen academy led to a reduction in the number of failed
freshmen classes, less expulsions, and increased attendance rates (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The principal of the school felt that the academy proved to be so successful because their goals for this academy were not focused solely on academic success. The philosophy for their freshman academy focused on meeting the individual needs of ninth grade students and helping them create a positive self-image. (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 451)

While there are many freshman academy success stories, there are examples of negative experiences. Most of the negatives are centered on social concerns, such as participation in sports, extracurricular activities, and school dances (Haselden et al., 2012). Some students who participated in a freshman academy expressed anxiety about their social interaction with the upper-class students at school events. According to Cohen and Smerdon (2009), students believed the upper-class students treated them as middle school students rather than as a high school peer. This caused students to feel as if they were still attending middle school and not in high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). As a consequence, students reported feeling alienated and afraid to interact with upper-class students (Haselden et al., 2012; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Sarasota County Schools in Florida experimented with freshman academies, but ultimately decided to eliminate them. Leaders within the Sarasota County School District found that freshman academies caused their students to have two freshman years, one in the academy and one when they enter the tenth grade (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2009).

Research completed by Kennelly and Monrad (2007) shows that schools with support programs or freshman academies have an average dropout rate of approximately 8%, while schools lacking such programs have a dropout rate of roughly 24%. Unfortunately, the same research shows that only about 15% of high schools across the seven states analyzed had fully implemented some type of program for their ninth-grade students (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).
The question then becomes, why is there such a small amount of schools implementing support programs? Existing research suggests that the absence of such programs comes from a lack of resources, capital, time, and scheduling limitations (Uvaas & McKeivitt, 2013). Therefore, schools should attempt to utilize the resources at their disposal as transition programming has been proven to help create a more seamless transition to high school.

**Schlossberg’s Transition Theory**

Dr. Nancy Schlossberg’s Theory of Transition is a psychosocial model of development crafted in the late 1970’s that examines life events which affect various aspects of an individual’s life and their societal roles. A transition is defined as any event, or non-event, which results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 3). In order to understand the meaning that a transition has for a particular individual, the type, context, and effect of the transition must be considered. According to Chickering and Schlossberg (2001), transitions do not have an end point. Rather, a transition is “a process over time that includes phases of assimilation and continuous appraisal as people move in, move through, and move out of it” (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2001, p. 53).

While the moving in and moving out positions are typically easy for most to understand, the moving through position is a bit more involved. Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012) describe the moving through part of a transition as one of searching for new roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions; a neutral zone or period of emptiness and confusion; a cycle of renewal; and a time of hope and spirituality (p. 53). Schlossberg identifies the moving through phase as a time of revitalization or decline. Because students transitioning from middle-to high-school are inevitably involved in multiple stages of a variety of transitions, it is
imperative to determine which portion of the transition cycle they are most focused on in order to provide the proper types of support.

In order to assist someone in successfully navigating through a transition, Anderson et al. (2012) envision three steps:

1) Approaching Transitions – This involves identifying the transition and how much it will change a person’s life as well as where the individual is in the transition process.

2) Taking Stock of Coping Resources

3) Taking Charge: Strengthening Resources.

Schlossberg classifies resources into one of four categories, also known as the 4 S’s. The 4 S’s are implemented within the Transition Theory as a way to understand how the four factors influence a person’s ability to cope with difficult transitions. They are: 1) Situation – What precipitated the transition? What aspect of the transition does the individual perceive as being within his/her control? 2) Self – Personal and demographic characteristics affect how an individual views life, such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, stage of life, state of health and ethnicity. Psychological resources include ego development, outlook, commitment, and values. 3) Support – Is support being provided by the family unit, network of friends, educational institution, and/or community? 4) Strategies – Coping responses that modify the situation, control the meaning of the problem, or aid in managing the stress in the aftermath. (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2001, p. 13).
In any given situation, these resources can be viewed as assets or liabilities, depending on how they are viewed by the individual and how they assist in his/her transition. As it pertains to this study, analyzing how ninth-grade students interact with the above-mentioned factors can help explain “why individuals react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times” (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, p. 57). In addition, using the Transition Theory as the foundation for the transition program can assist in providing an understanding as to why ninth-grade students react differently to transitions. Thus, providing more insight as to how a freshmen cohort transition program will affect students’ middle- to high-school transition.

**Empirical Findings**

The literature reveals that freshman transition programs have a positive influence on students’ self-perception, student achievement, behavior, and attendance during their freshman year of high school (Haselden, Sanders, & Sturkie, 2012). As students transition from middle- to high-school, the experience can be very different for each student. In some cases, transition
begins before the end of middle-school and continues after the culmination of a student’s ninth-grade school year (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Uvaas & McKeveit, 2013). Students indicated that the greatest support they received throughout their transition to high school was from peers that were developmentally and socially similar (Uvaas & McKeveit, 2013). Therefore, it is important to understand the needs of each student experiencing the transition in order to structure the program to fit with their developmental, cultural, and psychological needs (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). The Empirical Findings Table (Appendix C) encompasses empirical studies relating to the transition from middle- to high-school and provides perspective as to how the transition has been addressed previously.

Gaps in the Literature

This literature review examined several issues encountered by students as they transition from middle- to high-school and the various ways transition programs have attempted to address those issues. Several studies have been conducted as to the effect of ninth-grade transition programs on a large group of students, called ninth-grade academies. Literature revealed that an academy model supports students by facilitating stronger peer relationships, providing more academic support, and eliminating the fear of interacting with older peers (Haselden et al., 2012; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Smith et al., 2006). However, additional research shows that, while benefits do exist as a result of separating ninth-grade students from their older peers, issues do arise when students transition from ninth- to tenth-grade and reintegrate with their older peers (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Uvaas & McKeveit, 2013).

While transition programming can take on many forms, this study will examine transition programming that uses an academy-like approach while focusing on a specific subset of students. Because other studies have been on a larger scale and have separated ninth-graders from older
students, this study will work to address the gap in the literature related to incorporating transition programming for a small group of ninth-grade students as they still interact with older peers.

**Chapter Summary**

After reviewing the literature regarding the issues students face as they transition to high-school and the various ways transition programming has implemented, several themes consistently emerged from the literature that relate to this action research case study. Most importantly, it is evident that transition programming must be proactive and designed with a purpose in mind. Upon examination of the empirical studies present in this review, the following themes surfaced:

1. Transition programs should be designed with the intention of providing an adequate support system for students.
2. Transition programs should facilitate the development of strong relationships, between students and between students and teachers.
3. Transition programs should help to create a learning environment that promotes consistent attendance and proper behavior.
4. Transitions do not occur only from middle- to high-school. Transitions are occurring frequently, and proper coping strategies need to be incorporated to help students deal with each transition.
5. Transition programs should incorporate a social and emotional development component.

Schlossberg (2011) provides the 4S framework of Self, Situation, Strategies, and Support with which transitions can be managed. Action research provides an opportunity to explore how the
4S’s can best help to address the struggles of students as they transition from middle- to high-school. Although several studies exist which investigate ninth-grade transition, this study used the 4S framework to study how a cohort-style transition program impacted the transition to high-school for students who have been placed at-risk.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

As stated previously, the purpose of this Action Research study was to use Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to inform the implementation of a cohort-style transition program for at-risk ninth grade students and analyze its effectiveness in preparing students for academic success. Three research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent does a cohort-style transition program impact the learning environment for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk?
2. What trends in behavior, attendance, and academic achievement are observed in ninth-grade students placed at-risk who participate in a cohort-style transition program as compared to those who do not participate?
3. How does one's participation in an action research team affect the implementation of a transition program for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk?

This chapter describes the methodology utilized to guide this action research case study. It contains the following: a rationale for employing action research, the overall design of the study, the process for participant selection, description of the data collection process, description of the data analysis process, and insight into the trustworthiness of the data.

Action Research Approach

Action research was the proper method for this study because it seeks transformative change through the simultaneous process of taking action and doing research, which are linked
together by constant reflection (Stringer, 2014). Action research practitioners reflect upon the consequences of their own questions, beliefs, assumptions, and practices with the goal of understanding, developing, and improving educational practices. This action is simultaneously directed towards creating change within the organization or institution which the practitioner works. Action research places the researcher in the middle of the inquiry, rather than being on the outside as an observer. The researcher studies what he or she does in a collaborative setting with others, which engages all participants in a pursuit for deeper understandings that lead to improvement (Stringer, 2014). Action researchers are often guided by questions which seek to find a solution to an existing problem. Action research takes time, energy, commitment, and courage because it is about creating change, which could mean changing one’s thinking.

As outlined in Figure 4, the four key steps of an action research cycle include diagnosing the problem, planning the action, taking action, and evaluating the action. Critical reflection on action is a key component of action research as the intended and unintended outcomes of the action are evaluated during the last step in order to make adjustments and feed into the next cycle. According to Coghlan and Brannick (2014), multiple action research cycles are operating concurrently with different time spans.
While progressing through the action research cycle, the choice of specific data collection and analysis methods are made as a result of the overall scope of the organization within which the action research is being conducted. Furthermore, the choice of research methods in action research is dependent upon the question, problem, and the nature of the situation. Making decisions regarding involvement in action research carries certain risks. It involves questioning one’s thinking and deciding actively to change self-perceptions and personal or professional habits. Action researchers recognize that they are ultimately responsible for decisions made by the team and the consequences of those decisions.

Case Type and Boundaries

Case study was a proper method to use in this situation because it is amongst the most flexible of research designs and is particularly useful in researching issues related to institutional systems. Stake (1995) defines case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). Case studies incorporate a number of data-gathering strategies, which enables the researcher to investigate a phenomenon or problem as it occurs within its real-life context (Simons, 2013, p. 20). The primary purpose of employing a case study is to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific topic to enact change in the form of policy, practice, or action. According to Yin (2003), a case study design should be considered when the focus of the research study is to answer “how” and “why” questions. Additionally, case study design should be used because the researcher cannot manipulate the behavior of the participants involved in the study (Yin, 2003).

Stake (1995) classified case studies into three main categories: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Intrinsic cases are often exploratory in nature, where the researcher is guided by
their interest in the case itself. An intrinsic case study is generally conducted to learn about a unique phenomenon (Stake, 1995). Contrary to an intrinsic case study, the instrumental case study uses a specific case to gain a more comprehensive appreciation of an issue. A collective case study is undertaken to study multiple cases simultaneously to understand a particular issue. This case study is both intrinsic and instrumental. Initially, the action research team viewed this study as intrinsic due to our goal of understanding the issue of ninth-grade transition at Jefferson High School. However, our study developed into an instrumental case study through seeking to understand the struggles of a specific student population, generating findings that could potentially be transferred to other contexts.

This case is bound by the twenty-two students who will be enrolled into the cohort-style transition program and the four teachers interacting with the students on a daily basis. However, this case will mainly focus on the participating teachers and their influence on the program itself. There is an assumption that the at-risk students will perform at a higher level simply due to the extra supports they will be provided. Nevertheless, the sole focus cannot be the students because the teachers who will be involved are the most integral part. It is important to understand the teachers’ perceptions of the program and how their involvement shaped the program as it is being implemented.

**Design of the Action Research Study**

Freshman transition programs can be difficult to implement at a traditional high school due to several factors: layout of the building, course scheduling limitations, willingness of students to participate, and administrative support (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). The issues we have encountered at Jefferson were no different.
At Jefferson High School, we lack the ability to separate the ninth-grade students from the rest of the student population or create personalized schedules for each ninth-grade student. Additionally, ninth-grade students in previous school years have taken Advanced Placement (AP) courses, which also include tenth- and eleventh-grade students. Creating schedules to fit the needs of these students would have likely created a logistical nightmare which would not have been solved. One solution the AR team explored was scaling down the transition program to focus on a particular subset of students, the at-risk student population.

Students are often placed at-risk as a result of circumstances that are beyond their control. Students who are considered part of the at-risk population meet specific criteria, such as socioeconomic status, housing situation, attendance trends, behavior trends, academic achievement, etc. Additionally, students who are placed at-risk do not receive Special Education services or English Language services. Research indicates that at-risk students typically show signs of struggle at the beginning of ninth-grade, but, due to the fact they do not receive additional services or accommodations, these students are prone to being “left behind” and “fall through the cracks” (McIntosh & White, 2006; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Mizelle, 2005). This research study employed action research and case study methods in order to investigate this problem, which was not unique to Jefferson High School.

Action research is defined as a process in which participants examine a problem or issue systematically and carefully, using specific research techniques (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Although there are many types of research that may be employed, action research is best for this study because it requires that the researcher reframe the problem by looking at it in different contexts, through different perspectives, as part of a larger system. Inherent to action research is the idea that researchers will implement a cycle of questioning, gathering data, reflection, and
deciding on a course of action (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Sagor, 2011; Coghlan & Brannick, 2014).

This study progressed through two action research cycles between the time period of July 2017 and December 2017. Cycle I consisted of diagnosing the problem and establishing the vision, creating the overall structure of the cohort-style transition program, implementing the transition program, collecting data, and analyzing the data to plan future action. The initial data that was collected indicated that students placed at-risk transitioned to high-school with more difficulty as compared to students who were not placed at-risk. The analysis of this data led to the initial design of the intervention, assisted in identifying students who were placed at-risk, and facilitated adjustments to the structure of the intervention to fit the capacity of Jefferson High School. Implementation of the intervention, the cohort-style transition program, began on day one of school in August 2017. Cycle II of the action research cycle was used to reflect on the experience of the study participants during Cycle I. Cycle II’s focus was on re-establishing the vision, discussing and implementing changes, collecting data, and analyzing the data to plan for future action for the organization.

The challenge that Jefferson High School was facing with this intervention was the rigidity of its structure. While major changes may have been discussed through each action research cycle, the action research team was only able to use the data to make minor changes (i.e., more mentoring opportunities, teach more life skills, slow the pace of the courses, allow more opportunities for recovery). The main points of the transition program were set in stone for the duration of this study and through the school year (course schedule, students in the program, etc.). However, progressing through these two action research cycles provided adequate data to inform future planning at Jefferson High School.
This action research case study employed sequential transformative mixed-methods, where qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently. Sequential transformative design was the appropriate method to use in order to gain a deeper level of understanding about the problem while attempting to offset the weaknesses inherent to using a qualitative or quantitative approach by itself.

Throughout the implementation of the transition program, participating teachers took part in focus group sessions. Focus group sessions are a type of in-depth interview accomplished within a group setting (Sagor, 2011). The focus or object of analysis is enhanced due to the interaction inside the group. The focus group participants influence each other through their responses to the questions or prompts provided by the facilitator. Additionally, the facilitator can attempt to stimulate further discussion with comments or further questioning. The qualitative data produced by this technique were collected via transcripts of the group discussions and the facilitator’s reflections and annotations. Collecting real-time feedback through focus group sessions allowed the action research team to use the data to inform future planning for the program as the study progressed and gain an understanding as to how participating in this study impacted a teacher’s ability to implement the transition program.

In addition to focus group sessions, data were collected at the conclusion of this study via a survey completed by the study participants (Appendix D). The survey is original, created by the researcher, and asked the participants to reflect on their experiences during the study. The researcher used a combination of Likert-Scale and open-ended questions to attempt to collect more in-depth data as it related to the effectiveness of the transition program in providing a proper learning environment for students who were placed at-risk.
Analyzing various sets of attendance, behavior, and achievement data from previous school years provided the action research team the ability to identify trends associated with each student. As the study progressed, the same sets of data were analyzed and compared to each student’s attendance, behavior, and achievement while enrolled in the transition program. Comparing the varying data sets allowed the action research team to see how the program impacted these trends.

**Selection of Participants**

Students in ninth-grade typically express hesitation to participate in a transition program due to the extra attention they may receive from teachers or their peers (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Due to the social nature of high school, it can be difficult to convince a struggling student to participate in a program they feel would cause them embarrassment. Therefore, it was important to remove emotion and bias from the process of identifying students who could benefit from a cohort-style transition program. To accomplish this, the team decided that students should be selected for the transition program based on a combination of different data, rather than our own perception or opinion of each student.

**Students.** The initial process of identifying students for the transition program began after receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Jefferson High School’s social worker, Ms. Kincade\(^2\), was asked to assist in the identification of students who have been placed at-risk. Part of her responsibilities as the social worker at Jefferson is to identify these students as they enter the school and begin meeting with them immediately to monitor their social and emotional progress.

\(^2\) Name is a pseudonym
To begin the identification process for the intervention, Ms. Kincade pulled data from Lake County Public Schools’ internal database called Class Profiles 2.1. Class Profiles 2.1 provides a risk assessment for every student in the district based on the Early Warning Indicators (EWI) outlined in the Student Risk Assessment (Appendix B). For each EWI that is identified as an area of concern, Class Profiles 2.1 flags the EWI with the color red. If the EWI is not identified as an area of concern, there is no marking.

Ms. Kincade, in conjunction with the guidance counselors from Jefferson’s feeder middle schools, used an already-established process by Lake County to review the flags collected from Class Profiles 2.1 and identify students who have been placed at-risk. In order to maintain student anonymity, Ms. Kincade and the middle-school counselors did not share the dataset with the action research team, nor did they describe the process they used. Ms. Kincade shared the names of students identified as being placed at-risk with the head counselor, who was not a member of the action research team. Jefferson High School’s head counselor then contacted each of the students and their parents to discuss the planned intervention to gain approval for the student to be enrolled. In total, 45 rising ninth-grade students qualified as being placed at-risk. Of those 45, only 22 agreed to be included in the intervention.

**Teachers.** Once the principal at Jefferson High School granted approval to implement an intervention focused on ninth-grade transition, the process for selecting teacher participants began. Initial communication via e-mail was sent to the department chairs for Math, Science, and English, asking for teachers who were qualified to teach the courses which would be included in the cohort model. As a result of these initial discussions with department chairs, several teachers were identified as being able to participate in the transition program. Using our initial list of potential teachers, the next step was to confirm that each potential teacher’s certification aligned
with the courses that would be included in the program. This step in the process allowed us to eliminate a few teachers and identify the specific teachers needed to implement this program appropriately.

The remaining teachers were initially contacted via e-mail to inform them of the study being conducted and the process for implementing an intervention. A few teachers stated their lack of interest, so the list was narrowed further to eight remaining candidates. The remaining candidates participated in discussions with the core AR team in order to better understand the plan and the goal for the study. At the conclusion of these conversations, four teachers volunteered to participate in the intervention as a classroom teacher and as an action research team member.

**Falcons Learning Excellence (FLEX) Program**

Theorizing about the transition program and the logistics of it was easy compared to the work on which the team embarked upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. In order to create a functional transition program, the initial members of the action research team read through literature which discussed ninth grade transition programs. The literature allowed us to dive deeper into the purpose of transition programs and how previously implemented programs have worked at other schools. The research showed that ninth grade students who were exposed to small learning communities and ninth grade academies saw less academic problems, lower dropout rates, and lower retention rates (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; McIntosh & White, 2006). Additionally, students attending a ninth-grade academy experienced more opportunities for class participation, greater success on statewide tests, and increased bonding with classmates (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

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3 Name is a pseudonym
The findings from the literature supported our initial hypothesis, an academy model would be the best structure to support our struggling students (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). However, we were unsure as to how an academy would fit in with our school. Jefferson High School’s building opened in 2007 and was originally built with a maximum capacity of 1,900 students. Enrollment for Jefferson High School for the 2017 – 2018 school year was anticipated to reach 2,700 students. As a result, we operated with the understanding that a cohort model would be best, but that scheduling could keep us from implementing the exact type of program we aspired to implement.

Prior to looking at any student’s schedule, we reviewed achievement data for students who were placed at-risk in previous school years at Jefferson. The goal behind this data-dive was to identify any trends or similarities in achievement level between our at-risk students during the past three school years. In analyzing the achievement data, we were able to identify three courses in which at-risk students consistently struggled to earn passing grades: Algebra I, Biology, and 9th Grade Literature. The lack of success in the aforementioned courses resulted in a majority of our at-risk students failing to remain on track for graduation. Thus, the focus of our efforts in designing the transition program centered on providing adequate support in these three courses and setting our students up for future success.

As we explored scheduling for the twenty-two students selected for the program, the team felt that simply putting the students together for Algebra I, Biology, and 9th Grade Literature was not going to be enough. Data indicated that Algebra I was the course most often failed by students who had been placed at-risk. In order to provide an additional level of support for this course, one action research team member suggested adding an Algebra I Support class to the cohort schedule. There are no assignments or tests in Algebra I Support, it is a course designed to
provide more individualized help for students enrolled in Algebra I. Theoretically, Algebra I Support was an easy addition to the cohort schedule. However, we had not begun to enter the schedules into our schedule builder, so we were unsure if, in reality, it would fit.

With questions surrounding the Algebra I Support class, we continued to explore scheduling options for our twenty-two students. Revisiting the achievement data from previous years caused some concern about including Biology in the students’ schedules. Historically, Biology has been difficult for ninth-grade students at Jefferson as the course content contains rigorous concepts and requires a high level of Algebraic knowledge. Additionally, Biology, Algebra I and 9th Grade Literature have End-of-Course (EOC) tests that students are required to take at the end of the school year. In an attempt to avoid overwhelming the cohort’s students, Biology was replaced with Earth Systems. By enrolling in Earth Systems, the students would still earn a Science credit for graduation requirements but would only be required to take two EOC tests and would not be inundated with the level of rigor found in Biology.

Reflecting back on the literature we read, the team discussed our program’s ability to help these students develop skills they would need beyond their ninth-grade year. Academic success is one outcome we aspired to see from this program, but we also wanted to help our students with more than academics. The options for courses that teach the type of skills we were searching for are nearly non-existent. However, the team was able to identify one course. The course, called Tools for College Success, employs the Strategic Instruction Model, which is centered around teaching skills that students need to be successful in all aspects of their lives. The team unanimously decided to include this course, which completed the cohort’s course schedule.
The structure of the cohort-style transition program, entitled Falcons Learning Excellence (FLEX), was complete and ready to be entered into the schedule builder. Each student in FLEX would take five courses together: Algebra I, Algebra I Support, Earth Systems, 9th Grade Literature and Tools for College Success. The other two courses in their schedule would be electives to be chosen by the student.

**Tools for College Success**

Tools for College Success is a course designed to increase the probability of our students’ success by helping them obtain the skills necessary to reach their educational and personal objectives. The course provides students the opportunity to learn proven skills to promote success in school and the workforce, including study skills and personal life skills. Tools for College Success integrates strategies and techniques related to personal growth, learning styles, academic and career success, problem solving, critical, and creative thinking through the implementation of the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM).

SIM encourages the effective learning of critical content by providing students with a set of skills that will help them “learn how to learn.” There are two components of the SIM process that work together to improve student performance: Content Enhancement Routines (CER) and Learning Strategies (LS). SIM strategies can be introduced at any age and will continue to support students throughout their academic careers.

Content Enhancement Routines focus on how teachers plan for, adapt, and present content to their students. Learning Strategies are interventions specifically for students who are struggling and have fallen behind their academic peers. They are designed to provide the foundational skills that students need to learn content. Learning Strategies incorporates strategies for acquiring information from the printed word, for organizing information, for solving
conceptual problems and for expressing information in writing. Applying Content Enhancement Routines consistently and implementing Learning Strategies that give added supports for struggling learners, the tiered approach of SIM provides a powerful and evidence-based platform for improved student outcomes, inside and outside the classroom.

**Embedded Mentoring**

In an effort to include social-emotional support for students who have been placed at-risk, an additional component of FLEX that was discussed was the inclusion of an embedded mentoring program. Mentor and Support⁴ is a non-profit organization that has been providing one-to-one mentoring partnerships to at-risk school-age children and youth since 2002. Their mission is to serve children in need of positive role models and to help them grow into healthy and productive members of the community. Mentors are matched with students based on common interests and commit to meeting with their mentee at school on a weekly basis for the duration of the school year. Research shows that children who are involved in one-to-one mentoring programs are less likely than their peers to start using illegal drugs, drink underage, skip school, and display aggressive behavior (DeSocio et al., 2007). Even though one-to-one mentoring is not academically focused, the opportunity to provide students who have been placed at-risk with a positive role model was something the action research team felt obligated to do.

Students who have been placed at-risk can face serious risks like homelessness, suspension, early parenthood, lack of academic confidence, or abuse. In some cases, students experience several risks on multiple occasions. America’s Promise Alliance (2015) found that students who engaged in mentoring relationships were more likely to overcome the adversity

⁴ Name is a pseudonym
they faced and re-engage in their academics. While there are many forms of mentorship, researchers emphasize that mentorship entails much more than simply being there for an adolescent (DeSocio et al., 2007). Mentors can serve a wide range of needs and those needs are dependent upon each adolescent’s personal situation (America’s Promise Alliance, 2015).

The most significant characteristic of an effective mentor was found to be that he or she is goal-oriented and focuses on building the relationship with the student (DeSocio et al., 2007). Moreover, the mentor should actively strive to establish a human connection with the adolescent where empathy and understanding are key. DeSocio et al. (2007) compares the establishment of a proper relationship to the building of a bridge; it takes planning, resources, and time. Mentors who work to build proper relationships seek to establish trust, understand the student, and act as an advocate in every aspect of their life. In developing our partnership with Mentor and Support, the action research team placed these ideas above all else to ensure our students were engaging in beneficial mentorships.

**Data Collection**

Data for this study was collected in multiple ways through the employment of sequential transformative mixed-methods. When employing sequential transformative mixed-methods, both quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently. The results from both methods are then integrated together at the end of the study, during the interpretation phase (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2007). Used in conjunction with one another, quantitative and qualitative data provide both precise measurement and generalizability of quantitative research and the in-depth, complex picture of qualitative research (Collins et al., 2007). Moreover, researchers are able to validate quantitative results with qualitative data, or vice versa. Additionally, mixed-
methods is best to use when the measurement of outcomes is simply not enough, and interpretation or usefulness of findings is needed.

**Post-Implementation Survey**

In an attempt to answer my first research question, *to what extent does a cohort-style transition program impact the learning environment for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk*, study participants were asked to complete a survey after the transition program had been implemented for the entire Fall Semester. The post-implementation survey (Appendix B) consisted of twenty Likert-Scale questions and five open-ended questions. The Likert-Scale questions asked the study participants to respond to statements regarding the overall structure of the transition program; how the program impacted the classroom environment and type of instruction; how the program affected academic achievement, attendance, and discipline; and whether or not they would recommend a transition program using this structure. The five open-ended questions allowed study participants the opportunity to reflect back on the program and provide their opinion as to the effectiveness of the program and any advice they have for future transition programs.

**Achievement, Attendance, and Behavior Data**

At the conclusion of Critical Milestone 1, the committee charged me with establishing a more comprehensive focus for my second research question. The initial wording of my second research question focused on how the program impacted the students as they progressed through their high school career. This question was found to be too ambiguous and one that could not be answered without conducting a multi-year longitudinal study. In order to make the proper changes to my approach, I read a multitude of studies conducted on transition programs to
understand how they evaluated a program’s effectiveness. Previously conducted studies collected
data on students prior to their enrollment in the transition program and continued to collect the
same data while the program was being implemented. The researchers then performed a trend
analysis in which any identifiable trends in the first data set were compared to identifiable trends
in the second data set. This comparison allowed the researchers to examine any changes in the
trends as students were enrolled in the transition program. For what I hoped to accomplish with
this study, a trend analysis of quantitative data seemed to be the best approach. Therefore, I
restructured my second research question to focus on identifying any changes in previously
established trends over a multi-year data set.

As a result of the aforementioned changes, quantitative data was collected in order to
answer the second research question, what trends in behavior, attendance, and academic
achievement are observed in ninth-grade students placed at-risk who participate in a cohort-
style transition program as compared to those who do not participate? All quantitative data was
collected by Ms. Kincade, who removed all identifiable information and created a pseudonym
for each student prior to providing each dataset to the action research team. Ms. Kincade did not
share her process for creating pseudonyms in order to maintain student anonymity.

Initially, attendance and behavior data were collected from seventh- and eighth-grade for
each student who was placed at-risk and enrolled into the transition program. The data was then
compiled to form two separate datasets: attendance events and behavior events. The compilation
of attendance event data was further broken down into two sub-categories: total tardy events and
total absence events. The data for these students was referred to as the In-Program group. Using
the same process outlined above, data was collected and categorized for students who were
placed at-risk and were not enrolled into the transition program. Data for these students were referred to as the Not-In-Program group.

Additionally, achievement data from each student’s seventh- and eighth-grade school years was collected for both groups of students, In-Program and Not-In-Program. In order to conduct an accurate analysis of achievement, each student’s overall course average was collected for their Math, Science, and English courses as they are the only courses students take during seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade.

Throughout the implementation of the transition program, the same data sets were collected for each group of students, on a bi-weekly basis. At the conclusion of the study, data compiled during the intervention for each group of students was compared to the datasets from previous school years to establish trends for each group. The established trends for the In-Program group were then compared to the trends for the Not-In-Program group. The comparison in each group’s trends allowed the action research team to determine if the transition program had a positive impact, negative impact, or no impact on the In-Program attendance, behavior, and achievement as compared to their Not-In-Program counterparts.

**Focus Group Sessions**

For the third research question, *how does one's participation in an action research team affect the implementation of a transition program for ninth grade students who are placed at-risk*, study participants were asked to partake in focus group sessions at various points during the study. Focus group sessions provide an environment which draw upon each participant’s attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions in a way that is not feasible using another method, such as one-to-one interviews. Individual interviews aim to obtain an individual’s opinions and beliefs, while focus groups use the group context to elicit a multiplicity of views
and emotions. While the feedback provided by focus group participants was invaluable to the
action research team, participants also benefited by being thought of as experts and being
actively involved in the intervention process. This approach seemed to empower participants,
which elicited more detailed, substantial feedback while developing a high level of trust with the
action research team.

In planning the structure of the focus group sessions, it was imperative to create a plan
which would ensure all participants have the opportunity to share his/her perceptions, while still
allowing for diversity of perceptions. Furthermore, the level of involvement of the facilitator was
considered throughout the development process. Low involvement by the facilitator could
encourage more open discussion but allow one participant to dominate the conversation or lead
to non-productive discussion. High involvement by the facilitator could curtail non-productive
discussion and ensure all desired topics are covered, but potentially allow facilitator bias to
produce data that mirrors this bias. In consideration of the advantages and disadvantages, a
proper balance was at the forefront of planning each focus group session. The timeline for this
study allowed for the focus group sessions to occur once a month over a five-month period. Each
focus group session was recorded and transcribed in order to capture the feedback provided by
the participants. A total of seven people participated in each session, not including myself, who
acted as the facilitator.

For each focus group session, study participants were provided an initial question aimed
at generating in-depth discussion. My role during the focus group sessions was limited as I
wanted to reduce the amount of researcher bias. In instances where the discussion became
stagnant or off-topic, I attempted to redirect by prompting the participants with a pre-determined
question. Additionally, if one or more participants dominated the discussion, I reached out to
other participants with a prompt to attempt to gain their involvement. I created a list of ten questions which was used interchangeably throughout the five sessions (Appendix C). The questions were designed to better understand each participant’s initial perceptions of transition programs and how their involvement in this study affected that initial perception. Additionally, I aimed to identify how their perception and involvement impacted the implementation of this transition program.

**Validity and Reliability**

Validity in research indicates consistency and trustworthiness regarding the activities and events associated with the problem being explored by a research study (Ali & Yusof, 2012). Furthermore, validity and reliability increase researcher transparency and limit the opportunities for a researcher to insert their bias into a research study (Simons, 2013). Using multiple data sources to collect and analyze the data, also known as triangulation, aims to circumvent personal biases of the researcher and overcome deficiencies intrinsic to the design of the study, thus increasing the validity of the study. Furthermore, the research study had been designed to use multiple variances of measurement, at different points in time, and in varying settings over a lengthy period of time. Table 1 outlines the various methods of data collection and analysis that were used to increase the validity and reliability of this action research case study.

Table 1

*Triangulation of Data to Ensure Validity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Anticipated Data to be Collected</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To what extent does a cohort-style transition program impact the learning environment for ninth-grade</td>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
<td>Inductive Coding Analysis (Focus Groups)</td>
<td>September 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open-Ended Post-Intervention Survey Responses</td>
<td></td>
<td>October 2017</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>November 2017</td>
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<td>December 2017</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>January 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Validity and accuracy of findings were confirmed through the triangulation of data. Triangulation facilitates the validation of data through cross examination from more than two sources in which the researcher is looking for patterns of convergence and divergence in the data (Creswell, 2014). Triangulation is particularly important because it furthers the researcher’s ability to gain a comprehensive view of the research question and establish a credible interpretation of their research findings. In this research study, triangulation occurred through the comparison of qualitative data received from survey responses and focus group sessions with quantitative achievement, attendance, and behavior data. Using this approach presented a challenge to the researcher to understand and articulate the various reasons for the existence of any inconsistencies between the two sets of data.
Data Analysis

In order to gain a thorough understanding of the transition program’s impact, the AR team used a variety of data analysis techniques to analyze the data collected in this study.

Coding

Qualitative data analysis through coding is the process of organizing and sorting your data to identify themes or topics (Saldana, 2013). During the initial meetings with the action research team, we discussed how coding is accomplished and why coding is used. This brief overview provided each team member a more thorough understanding as to what we would be doing with the data obtained from focus group sessions and the post-implementation survey. As a team, we decided to analyze each set of qualitative data as it was collected rather than waiting until the end of the intervention. The team felt this would provide us with an opportunity to use the feedback gathered to adjust the intervention, if necessary, as it was being implemented. However, more discussion was needed as to the method we would employ for coding the qualitative data being collected.

Coding can be done in a number of ways, with no method standing out above the rest. Saldana (2013) found that some researchers prefer to establish specific codes or themes prior to coding the data while others prefer to allow themes to emerge as the data is analyzed. Advantages and disadvantages exist with both approaches, so the approach used by the researcher is dependent upon his or her preference and the type of data being collected. As a team, we decided to use a combination of the two approaches to ensure we discovered as many themes or patterns as we could. Further investigation into coding methods led us to choose Content Analysis and Inductive Analysis as the two methods we would use to code our data.
Using both methods would be beneficial as we would be able to pre-select themes to investigate while allowing additional themes to emerge.

As part of the coding process, we felt it was important for the action research team to add notes detailing our reactions and ideas that emerge. Each team member can provide a different interpretation of data, as well as identifying additional connections to other data (Saldana, 2013). Moreover, if the team is aware of wider patterns growing out of the data, the notes can point toward questions and issues for us to dive deeper into as we code and collect more data.

**Analysis of Post-Implementation Survey Responses**

Saldana (2013) states that “a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative and/or essence-capturing attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 8). In order to capture the proper attributes of the data being coded, one can use multiple methods. However, it is best to use one method when possible as the coding method being used must be able to do more than simply label the data, it must link the data to the idea and back to other data (Saldana, 2013). After researching a variety of coding methods, the action research team decided content analysis coding fit with the type of data being collected through the post-implementation survey.

Content analysis is the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data (Saldana, 2013). The content data from participant responses to the open-ended questions on the post-implementation survey assisted in determining whether the study participants felt that the program created the proper learning environment for students who were placed at-risk. Additionally, the data being collected helped determine how the teachers’ participation in an action research study affected the implementation of the cohort-style transition program.
When using content analysis, the action research team was able to pre-assign themes for which to identify in the data sets. Analysis of the data through the pre-determined themes provided a deep level of insight in order to answer the aforementioned research questions. For instance, the content data from the surveys allowed us to determine if the transition program was being operated as designed and if it provided the type of learning environment at-risk students need to be successful.

The Likert Scale responses on the post-intervention survey offered high quality data as to the participants’ feelings about the cohort-style transition program. The difficulty with Likert-Scale surveys is identifying the proper way to compile and analyze the data itself. Research on Likert-Scale analysis identifies a One Sample t-Test or the Mann-Whitney Formula as the two best methods for analyzing Likert-Scale data (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). For smaller sample sizes, research indicates that the One Sample t-Test will provide more accurate results than the Mann-Whitney (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). However, being that my sample size was seven participants, the number of responses limited our ability to use either of the preferred methods as the results could be skewed by one outlying response. Therefore, Likert-Scale responses were analyzed using a scaled approach.

A scaled approach is a simple way to evaluate each Likert-Scale questions’ response by using a numbered system. For each question, the following point values will be assigned to each response option:

- **Strongly Agree** – 5 points
- **Agree** – 4 points
- **Neutral** – 3 points
- **Disagree** – 2 points
- Strongly Disagree – 1 point

As each question’s responses are collected and analyzed, an average response score was calculated. The average response score allowed the action research team to evaluate whether the participants agreed or disagreed with the statement they were provided. In essence, the higher the average response score, the more the participants agreed with the statement; the lower the average response score, the more the participants disagreed with the statement. While an opportunity still existed for one outlying response to slightly skew the average response score, the scaled approach limited the impact from an outlying response.

**Analysis of Achievement, Attendance, and Behavior Data**

As described earlier, attendance, behavior, and achievement data were collected from seventh- and eighth-grade for each student who was enrolled into the program and for students who were not enrolled into the program. For their academic achievement, we focused on the content areas for which they were enrolled in the cohort-style transition program: Math, English Literature, and Science. After collecting the previous years’ data, it was separated into two groups, *In-Program* and *Not-In-Program*. The data sets for each group of students was analyzed using a comparative trend analysis method and a descriptive statistical test. The initial trends were established by identifying the total number of behavior events, the total number of attendance events, and average achievement level for the *In-Program* group and the *Not-In-Program* group during their seventh- and eighth-grade school years. These patterns or trends established a baseline for each group of students, *In-Program* and *Not-In-Program*, as it related to their attendance, behavior, and achievement.

As students advanced through the Fall semester in the cohort, Ms. Kincade collected the same data sets for each group in order to establish the ninth-grade trends. After each collection
and analysis, the team compared the patterns or trends to the previously established baselines for seventh- and eighth-grade. The continuous comparison between trends provided the action research team an opportunity to observe and discuss the type of impact the cohort-style transition program seemed to be having on each student’s attendance, behavior, and academic achievement.

At the conclusion of the study, descriptive statistical analysis tests were run on the three data sets from seventh-, eighth-, and the first semester of ninth-grade. The descriptive statistical analysis tests helped the action research team determine the level of impact the intervention had on the In-Program group’s attendance, behavior, and achievement as compared to the Not-In-Program group.

**Analysis of Focus Group Sessions**

Contrary to the content analysis coding method used for the survey responses, inductive analysis allows the data to determine the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis (Saldana, 2013). The patterns, themes, and categories emerge out of the data rather than being imposed before data collection (Saldana, 2013). When conducting focus group sessions, the facilitator asks the participants specific questions to generate discussion. While facilitators generally attempt to allow the participants to direct the discussion, instances occur in which the facilitator dominates the discussion to ensure specific data is obtained. In these instances, comments may be overlooked which may provide crucial information for the study. Inductive data analysis helps researchers analyze the data obtained from focus groups and discover unanticipated themes while gaining a deeper insight as to how the transition program has impacted the students.
Study Limitations

To ensure a thorough examination of the intervention being implemented, this study collected and analyzed multiple types of data from a variety of perspectives. However, even when employing a mixed-methods approach to an action research study, limitations still exist. Acknowledging and addressing study limitations allows the action research team to provide a clear-cut analysis of this research. The limitations outlined below are those that the action research team feel should be addressed in future research.

Time

Time was a big factor in the development, implementation, and analysis of the intervention for this action research study. Timeline of the study, length of the study, and time to conduct action research team meetings were the most significant factors of time that needed to be addressed to make certain the findings of this study would be considered valid.

Final approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was not received until July; thus, creating a short timeline, approximately three weeks, to identify the students who were placed at-risk and work out their course schedule to fit within the structure of the intervention. Additionally, those three weeks were used to structure each study participants’ course schedule to ensure each participant was teaching a cohort class. Lastly, the time was used to solidify the various supports and strategies that were being incorporated into the transition program. On the first day of implementing the intervention, changes were still in the process of being made, which hindered the team’s ability to hit the ground running.

Each cohort that enters high school does so with the intention of graduating in a four-year period of time. This study evaluated the transition program’s impact over one semester of the eight each student plans on being in high school. Without conducting a longer study, the team is limited in its ability to attribute the findings of this study to the cohort-style transition program.
The action research team’s ability to attend action research meetings, due to their other obligations at Jefferson High School, prohibited the team to meet as often as we initially intended to. Study participants were required to do morning duty, attend Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, 504 Plan meetings, faculty meetings, and parent/teacher conferences. These duties and responsibilities as a high school teacher occupied much of their time during the week, thus, limiting the frequency, and length, of our action research team meetings.

Action research team members felt that the study was not greatly impacted by time limitations. However, team members also felt that future research will be more informed as to how time impacts the implementation of an intervention and the study of that intervention. As a result of the knowledge gained from this study, future programs will not be as limited by time.

Sample Size

Another limitation of this study stems from the number of participants that provided feedback and insight into the intervention. While the seven study participants were able to share their thoughts through the focus groups and Post-Implementation Survey, the small number of participants limited the team’s ability to conduct a proper statistical analysis of the Likert-Scale survey responses. With a sample size as small as seven, the outlying responses had the potential to impact the average score for each Likert-Scale question in a greater way. Consequently, specific questions on the survey were not able to be used for the team’s findings as the results were skewed. Including a larger number of participants would avoid such occurrences, therefore, providing more accurate findings.

Additionally, this study was limited by the number of students enrolled into the intervention. With only twenty-two students enrolled, the intervention reached 0.008% of
Jefferson High School’s student population. While the students enrolled in the program may have been positively impacted from the intervention, the action research team was not able to state that the general population would benefit from such an intervention.

**Course Scheduling**

Each student at Jefferson High School has individual wants and needs as it pertains to their course schedule. Because of the varying wants and needs, course scheduling at Jefferson is a long, complex process that involves every staff member and almost 2,700 students. The structure for the transition program developed by the action research team had to be revisited multiple times leading up to the beginning of the school year due to scheduling limitations resulting from creating course schedules for approximately 2,700 students. The courses selected for the transition program were only able to be offered at specific times of the day. Due to this limitation, students enrolled into the transition program were left with a small number of electives to pick for the two class-period-openings in their schedule. Therefore, several students were not able to take the elective course(s) they aspired to take. While this may not have had an impact on the findings of this study, future programs need to address this scheduling limitation during the development phase to ensure students are not discouraged from enrolling in transition programming.

**Insider Research**

While insider research provides many positives to an action research study, the concept of validity becomes increasingly problematic because of the researcher's involvement with the subject of study. Throughout the duration of this study, processes were put into place to ensure
my own knowledge of the organization did not lead to subjectivity and the invalidation of the study’s findings and recommendations.

Subjectivity in Research

Coghlan and Brannick (2014) recognize that subjectivity of the researcher is innately involved when conducting an action research study within the organization, called insider research. Subjectivity guides the researcher’s decision-making process as it relates to choosing a topic, formulating hypotheses, selecting methodologies, and interpreting data (Sagor, 2011). Rather than attempting to reduce subjectivity in action research studies, the researcher should identify his or her subjectivities, embrace them, and seek to understand why they occur (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014).

My subjectivity in this study stems from the variety of experiences I have had throughout my life. My childhood was one in which education was not high on the priority list. My family valued earning a wage over earning a degree. As the first in my family to attend a post-secondary institution, my oldest sister worked to change that narrative. Needless to say, her achieving success at a high level of education motivated me to do the same. While my career path had yet to be determined, my graduation from a university with a bachelor’s degree was a major step in my life.

After earning my bachelor’s degree, I did not step right into the field of education. My long and winding career path originated in the Finance industry. Working in finance allowed me to encounter a wide variety of people from different places and different cultures. With each interaction, I learned more about what led these people to the financial struggles they were experiencing. All the while, I continued to reflect on my own family’s struggles when I was a child, knowing that my four-year degree helped me to avoid the same struggles as a twenty-two-
year-old. As the days and months passed, I often thought about ways that I could help young adolescents correct their paths. Thus, my journey into education began.

I have served many roles throughout my years in education, starting as a paraprofessional and working my way up to an administrator. Additionally, I have worked in a variety of settings, ranging from Title I schools struggling to meet State benchmarks to schools ranking in the top five percent in the State of Georgia. Each school provided me with different experiences and different perspectives, all while continuing to learn about the various difficulties adolescents had to overcome to be successful.

Each experience in my life is unique to me and leads me to create my own perceptions and stereotypes about situations that occur around me. Furthermore, conducting a research study within the organization at which I work, could result in my knowledge of the organization impacting the study in a negative way. Thus, it is imperative to create a system of checks and balances to ensure objectivity. Incorporating an action research team, whose members all have their own unique experiences, and conducting focus group sessions with participants from varying backgrounds, will help to ensure all perspectives and viewpoints are being considered throughout the duration of my study. While complete objectivity may not be able to be accomplished, a more thorough understanding of the problem and intervention will occur.
CHAPTER 4

CASE STUDY

Jefferson High School, a school with an ever-increasing student population, is currently one of five high schools in Lake County School District. With district enrollment eclipsing 46,000 students, Lake County will be opening three new high schools in the next five years in an attempt to alleviate overcrowding that exists at its current high schools. Even with the constant growth, a 19% increase in student enrollment in the past three years, Jefferson High School continues to receive accolades for its student achievement. However, a recent decline in the graduation rate at Jefferson prompted a re-evaluation of the support systems that have been in place. In looking at how students were being supported at Jefferson, the lack of support for ninth-grade students was evident as the previously implemented programs focused on eleventh- and twelfth-grade students. Additionally, support programs previously implemented at Jefferson were found to rely heavily on the student to seek out help rather than proactively identifying students and providing support where needed. As a result, Jefferson’s leaders put forth an initiative for the school year, identify how to best support every student, not just those who vocalize a need for support.

Story and Outcomes\(^5\)

Prior to initiating the approval process for my study at the district level, I met with the principal at Jefferson High School, Ms. Smith, near the end of the 2016 school year. Being a newer teacher at Jefferson, it was imperative I gained a thorough understanding of the problems

\(^5\) All names in this section are pseudonyms
the school has encountered and how the school has attempted to solve those problems. According to Ms. Smith, the graduation rate had become a topic of conversation at both the district and school levels due to the increased focus on the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). Ms. Smith informed me that Jefferson High School’s graduation rate had declined over the past couple of years, so a data-dive was conducted to attempt to identify the reason for the decline. An analysis of Jefferson’s graduation data indicated that the majority of students who did not graduate on time at Jefferson fell behind academically during ninth-grade. Moreover, the academic troubles seemed to be occurring mostly in the core academic areas. Ms. Smith and I discussed the various supports provided to ninth-grade students at Jefferson. Based on our conversation, it seemed that ninth-grade support was an area that was lacking due to a bigger focus being placed on the eleventh- and twelfth-grade years. Therefore, I found the transition middle- to high-school to be the area in which I wanted to focus my research.

After concluding my discussion with Ms. Smith, I commenced the process for meeting with key stakeholders in the building to discuss previously implemented ninth-grade transition practices. I specifically sought out teachers of ninth-grade courses to further understand the struggles of Jefferson’s ninth-grade students and to assess their level of interest in being a change agent. Through these discussions, it became apparent that the transition to high-school had been an afterthought since the school’s inception in 2007. Because transition programs had not been implemented previously at Jefferson, my engagement with the literature surrounding ninth-grade transition allowed me to gain a deeper understanding as to the issues ninth-grade students face as they transition to high school. Reading the literature and gaining insight from ninth-grade teachers at Jefferson led me to create an initial framework for a transition program at Jefferson
High School. However, to properly implement an intervention at Jefferson, more investigation was needed as to the specific needs of Jefferson’s students.

**Action Research Team Members**

The process for creating an action research team began immediately after the discussion with Ms. Smith. While I was still working to obtain my approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), it was imperative that I recruit individuals who would be willing to actively engage throughout the entire action research process. Being that I was new to Jefferson High School and did not know the staff members that well, I engaged in multiple discussions with Ms. Smith and the department chairs for Math, Science, and English about potential team members. From these discussions, the names of several staff members materialized. After communicating with each staff member about action research and the purpose of my study, I was able to obtain commitments from three people. This led to the development of the core action research team, which consisted of the graduation coach, one teacher, one guidance counselor, and myself.

Each core AR team member brought something different to the team. The teacher who committed to participate in the core AR team had over twenty years’ experience teaching ninth-grade students at several different schools. The guidance counselor had been at Jefferson since the school’s inception and had worked extensively with students in ninth- and tenth-grade. Her time at Jefferson, coupled with her duties as a ninth- and tenth-grade counselor, provided a level of insight into the needs of Jefferson’s students unmatched by anyone in the building. Finally, the graduation coach’s work with struggling students of all ages afforded her the ability to provide perspective as to the struggles facing the students at Jefferson High School. Additionally, her experience in working with various interventions provided the team with further insight into the strengths and weaknesses of previously implemented interventions.
While the core AR team had been established, there was still a need for four additional AR team members. These additional team members would be teaching the courses that the core AR team planned to be the central focus of the intervention. Additionally, the four additional team members would be providing their feedback through focus group sessions and through completion of the Post-Implementation Survey. In chapter three, there is a description of the selection process I used to gain commitments for the four additional team members needed to implement the intervention.

**Changes in the Context**

As the action research team began conducting informal discussions, the spring semester of the 2016 – 2017 school year saw changes in leadership and organizational responsibilities at Jefferson High School which impacted the action research team’s process for implementation. The first wave of change occurred when the principal at Jefferson, Ms. Smith, was named as the principal for one of the new high schools opening in the near future. While many staff members anticipated Ms. Smith would be leaving Jefferson, it still sent shockwaves through the building. A replacement for Ms. Smith was named in February 2017, six weeks after Ms. Smith was announced for the new school.

Mr. Carrington, the new principal, did not officially start as the principal of Jefferson High School until June, but he visited Jefferson almost daily to meet staff members and facilitate meetings. Throughout the remainder of the school year, Mr. Carrington shared his vision for Jefferson High School, with some aspects of his vision taking Jefferson in a new direction. Due to this new approach, the AR team met with Mr. Carrington to review the action research process
and the framework for the intervention to ensure he approved. After providing clarity for some of
the more intricate details of the intervention, Mr. Carrington granted his approval.

Along with the change in principal, a member of the administrative team earned an
assistant principal position at another school in Lake County. As a result, an assistant
administrator position opened at Jefferson High School for the 2017 – 2018 school year. I
applied, interviewed, and was offered the position, which I accepted. My new position brought
with it duties and responsibilities that impacted my ability to interact with the action research
team as often as I had previously. Therefore, the action research team had to restructure the
timeline for meetings and important dates to coincide with my newfound duties.

During the early stages of development for this intervention, one administrator at
Jefferson High School was assigned ninth-grade discipline while two counselors split the ninth-
grade student population, one assigned to males and one assigned to females. With these
responsibilities in mind, the core action research team felt that the intervention would operate
more smoothly due to dealing with one administrator for discipline situations and two guidance
counselors for counseling situations. When Mr. Carrington was named principal, he made
changes to the discipline caseloads for administrators and student caseloads for guidance
counselors. The caseloads for administrators and guidance counselors were to be divided by
alphabet instead of grade level. Rather than interacting with one administrator and two
counselors, the core action research team, teachers, and students would now be interacting with
six administrators and six guidance counselors.

While the aforementioned changes occurring at Jefferson High School did not greatly
impact the core AR team’s approach or timeline, alterations were made to align with the new
organizational structure at Jefferson.
**Action Research Cycles**

Due to the rigid structure of the intervention being discussed, the AR team led two cycles of action research aligned with specific points in the school calendar: Cycle I (July 2017 through September 2017) and Cycle II (October 2017 through December 2017). This alignment with the school calendar created the best opportunity for the AR team to include each component of the action research cycle – diagnose, plan, act, and evaluate (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). The core action research team and the four additional AR team members participated in both action research cycles.

**Cycle I – July 2017 through September 2017**

After securing commitments from the necessary staff members at Jefferson High School, gaining approval from Mr. Carrington, and starting in my new position, the next step was to conduct official meetings where the AR team could explore the problem. Initially, action research team members were unfamiliar with the AR process. So, in order to help them gain a deeper understanding of action research, the team explored literature and articles pertaining to action research. As a team, we discussed the benefits of action research and explored the roles each member would play throughout the study.

In addition to literature surrounding action research, literature related to high-school transition was also provided to AR team members. Throughout the duration of the first few meetings, the AR team shared their thoughts and engaged in discussions about the middle- to high-school transition. As the team learned more about the struggles that ninth-grade students encounter, the focus became the specific problem being faced at Jefferson High School. Using the literature and data obtained from the graduation coach as talking points, the problem was
diagnosed as one in which ninth-grade students were overwhelmed by the transition from middle-school to Jefferson High School, which led to higher anxiety and stress.

Initially, the action research team felt that a ninth-grade academy would be the most beneficial approach in addressing the struggles of our ninth-grade students. When discussing the framework of a ninth-grade academy, it was clear that a ninth-grade academy was not a feasible option due to the building’s limitations. Thus, the action research team began to plan the intervention with a cohort model in mind. A cohort model would use the principle ideas behind an academy but would allow the team to implement the intervention at a smaller scale than a full academy. Additionally, a smaller scale transition program would enable the AR team to structure the program with the 4S’s – Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies – as the foundation.

Lacking the understanding as to the school’s capacity for implementing a cohort model, the core AR team consulted the assistant principal over curriculum, Mr. Tucker. At the time of consultation, Mr. Tucker had almost thirty years of scheduling experience at the high school level with ten of those years spent at Jefferson High School. Mr. Tucker educated the core AR team on course scheduling and the challenges faced at Jefferson with a student population approaching 2,700. The core AR team revisited the graduation data provided by the graduation coach to further explore the feasibility of scaling-down the cohort model to focus on a particular group of students. During this latest data-dive, team members observed a commonality: students who failed Algebra I, Biology, and/or 9th Grade Literature typically did not graduate on time. As the commonality was investigated further, a large number of the students who failed at least two of the three aforementioned courses were students who had been placed at-risk, according to the Lake County Schools’ risk assessment.
After consulting with Mr. Tucker once again, he informed us that a cohort of up to 50 students could be easily scheduled, depending on the number of courses. The core AR team ultimately decided that the following courses would be included in the intervention: Algebra I, Algebra I Support, Earth Systems, 9th Grade Literature, and Tools for College Success. The next step was to identify the students who would be enrolled into the cohort-style program. The identification of students was completed by Jefferson High School’s social worker and the counselors at Jefferson’s feeder middle-schools. The list of students chosen for the program, twenty-two in total, was provided to Mr. Tucker by Jefferson’s social worker for scheduling purposes.

The last step in the planning action phase was ensuring the 4 S’s were addressed through the program. The nature of the transition program focused on the situation of ninth-grade transition to determine proper interventions for students who have been placed at-risk. Through the incorporation of the Tools for College Success course, career-readiness content, and course-embedded mentoring, the team felt we developed material to help students address their own self. The Tools course would also provide students with coping strategies they could use when encountering future transitions or facing difficulties. Lastly, the team felt that placing students who have been placed at-risk into a smaller learning environment would naturally lend itself to a stronger support system than those found in a traditional learning environment.

The team transitioned into the third step of the cycle, taking action. The students who were scheduled into the five courses selected by the core AR team met with their teachers prior to the first day of school. This meeting was organized and facilitated by the guidance counseling staff to review the structure of the program and ensure the students understood the program’s purpose. Implementation of the program began on the first day of school in August 2017. As the
semester advanced, the students attended the five courses within the cohort and the two elective courses outside of the cohort. The Tools course regularly incorporated career-readiness activities and mentoring sessions for each student. The action research team met on a bi-weekly basis to obtain teacher feedback as to how the program was operating. Focus group sessions were also held to facilitate discussion on the action research process and its impact on the program itself. Finally, every two weeks, student behavior, attendance, and academic achievement data was collected by Ms. Kincade and analyzed by the action research team.

Cycle I concluded on the last day of the first nine weeks, which marked the end of the first grading period for the school year. The action research team met to review the first nine weeks of implementation and discuss any changes the team felt were needing to be made. The team was able to implement some minor changes to the frequency of mentoring sessions and the type of activities being facilitated in the Tools course. While some frustrations were shared about the team’s inability to make more changes, the overall feedback about the program was positive and created momentum heading into the second action research cycle.

**Cycle II – October 2017 through January 2018**

As described earlier, the difficulty in implementing an intervention with this structure is the team’s inability to make significant changes to the program itself. The conclusion of Cycle I brought forth recommended changes the action research team felt were necessary to improve the intervention. Prior to initiating any changes, the AR team revisited the program’s vision and the problem that had been diagnosed. Through these reflective discussions, the vision was re-established, and the problem was analyzed with a more laser-like approach.

The cohort teachers provided ample feedback as to the underlying issues within the overall scope of the diagnosed problem. The cohort model seemed to be providing adequate
academic supports for the students enrolled into the program, but unanticipated issues resulted from the cohort structure. For each teacher in the cohort, time spent in the day-to-day classroom on behavior management seemed to increase as each week passed. Additionally, it was observed that students were not taking the mentoring sessions and career-readiness activities seriously. As a result of these observations, the action research team discussed our actions moving forward.

While not every change was able to be implemented, the AR team planned a few minor changes in an attempt to address the issues encountered during Cycle I. Rather than meeting with mentors on a weekly basis, the frequency of mentoring sessions was changed to bi-weekly. This would provide the students more time to focus on their academics and build relationships with their peers and their teachers. Furthermore, the number of career-readiness activities required for each student in the Tools course was also reduced and a new focus was decided on. Instead of completing daily career-readiness activities, the teacher would use more time in the Tools course to provide social and emotional support to the students through individual discussions, group activities, and lessons provide by Jefferson’s social worker, Ms. Kincade. With nine weeks left in the study, the AR team was anxious to see how the changes impacted the students and the implementation of the program.

During the second week of Cycle II, the minor changes were fully implemented. The AR team continued to meet on a bi-weekly basis to discuss the program. Ms. Kincade also continued to collect quantitative data to allow the AR team to analyze the program’s impact on attendance, achievement, and behavior trends. The final focus group session was conducted in December and participants completed the Post-Implementation Survey. The core AR team met on the last day of the fall semester to conduct a preliminary review of the transcripts and survey responses. Prior
to leaving for winter break, the core AR team felt that, in order to properly analyze the findings, meetings would need to occur twice a week rather than once every other week.

Upon our return in January 2018, the core AR team met twice a week to analyze the findings from the intervention. Throughout January, the team coded and analyzed the transcripts from the focus group sessions and the notes from our action research team meetings, analyzed the Likert-Scale responses from the survey, coded and analyzed the open-ended responses from the survey, and assisted in completing statistical analyses of the attendance, achievement, and behavior data for the In-Program and Not-In-Program datasets. Table 2 outlines the study’s interventions, the anticipated outcomes of each intervention, and type of data collected during each intervention.
### Intervention Implementation Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed Intervention</th>
<th>Action Research Team Activities</th>
<th>Anticipated Outcomes</th>
<th>Proposed Timeline</th>
<th>What data will be collected from the intervention?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Falcons Learning Excellence (FLEX) Program | - Analyze Class Profiles 2.1 Student Risk Assessment Data  
- Social Worker meetings with middle school counselors to obtain feedback about students  
- Social Worker selects students who will be enrolled into FLEX | Identify students who could qualify for additional supports using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data.  
Additionally, the action research team will work together to create a list of the risks associated with the students who are identified as needing additional supports. The potential risks are listed on the Student Risk Assessment as Early Warning Indicators and flagged in Class Profiles 2.1. The team will use these potential risks in conjunction with Schlossberg’s 4S Theory to establish a foundation for the transition program. | July 2017 | - Student Risk Assessment Data  
- Social Worker feedback |
The action research team aims to identify the various areas of academic weakness for the selected students by analyzing their achievement data from previous school years. Knowing their areas of weakness will help us in creating the proper structure for the FLEX Program.

Using a cohort style model as the building block, the action research team will create the structure for the FLEX Program. The academic areas that need to be included in the schedule were found to be Algebra I, Literature, and Science. Specific courses will be selected based on feedback from action research team members.

Once the structure and courses are in place, the action research team will schedule the selected students in the courses using the schedule builder.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentor and Support</th>
<th>Review literature regarding mentorships</th>
<th>Mentor and Support, a non-profit organization located in Georgia</th>
<th>Using literature as the discussion point, the action research team will explore the possibility of adding a mentorship piece into the FLEX Program. July – August 2017</th>
<th>Feedback will be obtained via action research team meetings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Falcons Learning Excellence (FLEX) Program</td>
<td>Meet every other week and discuss FLEX Program</td>
<td>Conduct Focus Group Sessions once a month Establish schedule for mentor-mentee meetings Review Tools for College Success content and adjust as needed Compile and analyze achievement, attendance, and behavior data for students in the transition program</td>
<td>Obtain feedback from action research team members and focus group participants to determine adjustments the team feels are necessary and plan for the implementation of future programs. August 2017 through December 2017</td>
<td>Feedback will be obtained through focus group sessions and action research team meetings Achievement, attendance, and behavior data Post-Implementation Survey Responses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflections

As I reflect on the action research process described in this chapter, it is clear that value exists in including those who engage completely with the team and the study itself. While it is important that I, as the leader of the group, facilitate the group’s discussions and decisions, valid implementation of the intervention rests on the shoulders of every team member, not just the team’s leader. This process forced me to learn how to work with colleagues who come from varying backgrounds and hold their own point of view about educational support systems. As a result of this study, I learned an important lesson, team members must feel comfortable to speak honestly, ask probing questions, provide pushback when needed, and engage in a collaborative relationship with others, all without fear of consequence. Through the establishment of proper norms and trust-building interactions, this collaborative team produced outcomes that could inform future practices at Jefferson High School and contribute to the literature surrounding transition programming at the high-school level.
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

The purpose of this Action Research study was to use Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to inform the implementation of a cohort-style transition program for at-risk ninth grade students and analyze its effectiveness in preparing students for academic success. Three research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent does a cohort-style transition program impact the learning environment for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk?

2. What trends in behavior, attendance, and academic achievement are observed in ninth-grade students placed at-risk who participate in a cohort-style transition program as compared to those who do not participate?

3. How does one's participation in an action research team affect the implementation of a transition program for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk?

Table 3

Research Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Findings from Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To what extent does a cohort-style transition program impact the learning</td>
<td>a. Cohort model created positive academic situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>environment for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk?</td>
<td>b. Structure of program led to stronger relationships between teachers and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Students were impacted by negative influences within the cohort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What trends in behavior, attendance, and academic achievement are observed in</td>
<td>a. Academic achievement trends were positively impacted across all three content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ninth-grade students placed at-risk who participate in a cohort-style transition</td>
<td>areas for In Program students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Tardy events increased for both groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
program as compared to those who do not participate?

c. Absent events decreased for both groups
d. Total number of behavior events remained virtually the same over the time period analyzed

3. How does one's participation in an action research team affect the implementation of a transition program for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk?

| a. Participation in an action research team led to more ownership of the program |
| b. AR team members felt more respected by building leadership |
| c. Inability to make significant changes during intervention caused frustration |

**Research Question 1: Impact of a Cohort-Style Program on the Learning Environment**

This action research study aimed to identify how the learning environment was impacted by a cohort-style transition program for ninth-grade students at Jefferson High School who were placed at-risk. Data were obtained from multiple sources in order to adequately evaluate the transition program as the teachers involved with the Falcons Learning Excellence Program (FLEX) provided feedback via focus group sessions, Likert-Scale survey responses, and open-ended survey responses. Obtaining feedback from the aforementioned sources afforded the teachers the ability to detail their experiences and observations while interacting with their peers. Additionally, responding to survey questions allowed teachers to offer anonymous, detailed and honest feedback they may not have felt comfortable providing in a focus group setting. The analysis of data led to the emergence of three main ideas associated with this research question:

1. The cohort model used for FLEX created positive academic situations for the students and teachers.

2. The structure of the cohort-style transition program led to stronger, and more positive, relationships being developed between students who have been placed at-risk and the teachers.
3. The ninth-grade students who participated in the cohort-style transition program were impacted by negative influences within the cohort.

Table 4

Impact on Learning Environment

<table>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Structure of program led to stronger relationships between teachers and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Students were impacted by negative influences within the cohort</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cohort Model Created Positive Academic Situations

The action research (AR) team evaluated how FLEX impacted the learning environment of the ninth-grade students who were placed at-risk through focus group sessions and the results of the Post-Implementation Survey. As data was analyzed, it was evident that the FLEX program provided a great academic benefit to the participating ninth-grade students. Survey responses highlighted the fact that the cohort model used for FLEX afforded teachers the opportunity to provide proper instruction and support for their students. Teachers were able to provide more in-depth instruction, more remediation opportunities, and differentiated and personalized instruction.
In-depth, Individualized Instruction. With an average response score of 4.0 to the statement, “The cohort-style transition program creates a classroom environment where individual student's needs are more easily met by the teacher,” teachers agreed that FLEX made it easier to identify and meet the needs of each of their students. The AR team hypothesized that the high response score could be attributed to smaller class sizes in FLEX classes than the traditional class. Responses to the question, “In what ways did the cohort-style model create a proper learning environment for students who have been placed at-risk,” supported the AR team’s hypothesis.

At the beginning of this action research study, the average class size at Jefferson High School was 33. With only 22 students in each FLEX class, teachers raved about their ability to slow the pace of instruction in their class, which resulted in more in-depth, individualized instruction. FLEX teachers were able to monitor their students more closely, while being intentional and deliberate with their instruction. Ms. Vanguard shared her thoughts about the impact the smaller class size had on her instruction:
With not having as many students to focus on, I was able to provide more time in class for students to develop the skills they need to be successful in my class. This was never more evident than with their writing. I was able to break the writing assignments down into a step-by-step process, which was reinforced through constant practice. I am not able to do that in my traditional classes.

The same teacher reported that FLEX provided her the opportunity to work with her students on a more individual level. Ms. Vanguard was able to meet with each student on a more consistent basis to identify his/her weaknesses and create a specific plan to address each area of weakness.

During the early stages of implementation, the AR team also felt that the smaller class sizes created by FLEX would prevent the situation in which a student flies under the radar and goes unnoticed. In response to the question, “What aspects of the cohort-style transition program have you found to be most impactful,” Ms. Walters supported our initial feelings:

I was able to pinpoint students who were trying not to bring attention to themselves. Even though certain students tried to hide, I was able to identify that quickly and ensure I worked with him/her.

Ms. Thomas responded, echoing the aforementioned sentiments:

In my regular classes where I have anywhere from 34 – 37 students, it is really easy for students to hide in the back. Having to address the needs of all of those students makes it difficult because some students require way more attention than others; or, should I say, demand more attention than others. That allows the quieter students to skirt by without improving. FLEX helped me identify those quieter kids much faster and address their needs right away.
Teachers did express that some students in FLEX were able to progress through their courses without as much attention as other students. However, their feedback indicated that those situations were uncommon, as teachers were adamant that every student received some level of individualized attention from each teacher throughout the timeline of this study.

![Bar chart: The cohort-style transition program creates a classroom environment where students receive an adequate level of support for their learning.]

Figure 6. Post-Implementation Survey Responses: Proper Support

**More Remediation.** The majority of FLEX teachers agreed that the cohort-style model provided a level of support not found in the traditional classroom setting. With an average response score of 4.0 to the statement, “The cohort-style transition program creates a classroom environment where students receive an adequate level of support for their learning,” results indicated that the learning needs of FLEX students were properly supported. Feedback from the teachers suggested that the structure of the FLEX program allowed them to slow the pace of instruction and provide students more opportunities for remediation. This was supported by Ms. Vanguard, who commented:
This program facilitates success by allowing time for extra guidance that allows a student to develop a skill set that makes them more independent and successful. We, as the teachers, are able to make changes in order to meet the students “where they are.”

Mr. McElroy elaborated:

FLEX allowed me to work with my students in a non-pressure paced atmosphere. If we needed to take more time to cover a concept, we took more time. I had the time to pay attention to their areas of need, without feeling rushed. Also, the students could feel that I was stress-free in that environment, so they fed off of that energy and were able to relax. They were able to focus on the content and in-class activities without feeling a sense of panic.

With the ability to provide more remediation, FLEX teachers noticed that students were able to develop a better work ethic. Several reasons were provided as to why their work ethic improved, but the most common response centered on the higher levels of confidence the students felt. Ms. Thomas noted:

The extra remediation opportunities led to students achieving more success, which, in turn, motivated them to work harder. As the semester progressed, students asked better questions and expected more from themselves. Without the extra remediation, I do not believe this would have occurred.

While many positives were shared regarding remediation and the cohort model, Ms. Lawrence highlighted a concern about the FLEX students as they advance through high school:

I worry that these students have become too dependent on the extra supports being provided by FLEX and have not learned how to take responsibility for their own learning. While they have experienced more academic success this year, I feel that the
students might be left out in the cold as they transition to regular classrooms in future school years.

Using the teacher’s comment as the basis for a discussion, the AR team explored various strategies that could have been used to help students increase their level of personal responsibility. The team felt that the incorporation of Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) strategies into every FLEX course could have prevented the students from becoming too dependent on the extra supports being provided by the FLEX model. SIM strategies are teaching tools that gradually release control from teacher to student, which help students comprehend information presented to them and solve problems effectively and efficiently. While these strategies were incorporated into the Tools for College Success course, the AR team agreed that the students needed more consistent exposure to them throughout the school day in order for them to be effective.

Figure 7. Post-Implementation Survey Responses: Personalized Instruction
Differentiated and Personalized Instruction. The literature supports the notion that students learn better when teachers are able to provide a variety of learning opportunities and personalize the learning experience. Based on their experiences during this study, FLEX teachers agreed as responses to the statement, “The cohort-style transition program allows teachers the ability to personalize instruction,” averaged 4.28 out of 5. In regard to traditional classroom settings, FLEX teachers expressed their frustration with having too many different personalities, interests, learning styles, and achievement levels in one class. Furthermore, teachers felt pressured to fit every student into one category to expedite the learning. In FLEX classes, the differences in each student were celebrated and lessons were created with those differences in mind. Mr. Anderson elaborated on this thought:

In my traditional classes, I was stuck to the curriculum and what other teachers of the course were doing. We were trying to incorporate over 120 different personalities into one lesson in a specific time frame. It was frustrating. For my FLEX students, I got to know them and what they enjoyed. That additional knowledge of them led me to creating more innovative lessons that peaked their interest.

Ms. Carnegie agreed:

It was the same way for my content. I was able to give them choices for projects and assignments. For assessments, I had the flexibility to provide them alternative testing options. Instead of everyone taking a written test, some students were able to create websites, blogs, visuals, videos, etc. I think the more personalized options really helped the students blossom.

When pressed further about how differentiation and personalization impacted the everyday classroom experience, FLEX teachers shared that not everything could be personalized. In
certain courses, there was still the need to have traditional classroom discussions, complete practice exercises, and complete traditional writing assignments. In those instances, the teachers observed a difference in the FLEX students’ engagement and excitement. Additionally, the rate at which FLEX students completed those traditional assignments was lower than the completion rate for the personalized assignments. While one can assume that the students were not as interested in the traditional assignments, there is no data to support a lower level of interest as the reason why students did not complete the traditional assignments at the same rate as the personalized assignments.

**Structure of Program Led to Stronger Relationships Between Teachers and Students**

During the early stages of developing the FLEX program, the AR team believed that the structure of a cohort-style transition program would enable teachers to develop more impactful relationships with their students. Feedback during the focus group sessions and results of the Post-Implementation Survey supported the AR team’s initial beliefs. With an average response score of 4.57 to the statement, “The cohort-style transition program creates an environment more conducive to students and teachers developing personal relationships,” FLEX teachers felt strongly that the cohort model led to deeper relationships being developed between teachers and the students.
The cohort-style transition program creates an environment more conducive to students and teachers developing personal relationships.

**Figure 8. Post-Implementation Survey Responses: Personal Relationships**

When prompted as to why they felt relationships were more easily developed within the FLEX classroom, teachers stated that smaller class sizes were their initial reasoning. However, as the semester progressed, the FLEX teachers felt that smaller class size was just a small reason. Mr. McElroy shared the following:

> At first, I thought less students would lead to better relationships. That was definitely a factor, but the overall environment led to better relationships. Slower pace and less-stress led to us building a level of trust I don’t typically have with my students in my traditional classes.

Ms. Vanguard responded:

> Exactly. We, meaning the students and I, trusted each other much earlier in the semester than my students normally trust me. I think the students knew that I truly cared about them and wanted them to be successful.
Lastly, Mr. Anderson attempted to summarize:

*I am not sure who said it, but I kept thinking about the quote, “They don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” The FLEX environment definitely let me show my students how much I cared in a much easier way... and that was priceless, especially when interacting with at-risk students.*

The FLEX teachers were asked to respond to the last comment, but rather than respond in a verbal manner, the other teachers simply nodded their head in agreement. Their responses to the statement, “The cohort-style transition program creates an environment where students feel as if the staff cares about their success,” supports their agreement as the average response score was a 4.28 out of 5.

![Figure 9. Post-Implementation Survey Responses: Staff Cares About Student Success](image)

The AR team aspired to create an environment where teachers and students were given additional opportunities to conduct non-academic discussions. Based on the feedback from the FLEX teachers, it seems as though the cohort model did what it was initially intended to do.
Collaboration Caused Continuous Monitoring by Multiple Teachers. Working within a cohort model, teachers were given the opportunity to collaborate with teachers in different content areas, but teachers who shared the same students. The structure of FLEX ensured that each student interacted with a team of teachers rather than an individual teacher. In other words, the students had more “eyes” on them throughout the day. The AR team felt that this would limit the troubling behaviors the students engaged in at the middle school level. Additionally, teachers were able to share observations and/or analysis about specific students in a seamless way. The AR team hypothesized that the ease of communication would assist in developing trust between the teachers and, ultimately, provide a great benefit to the students in FLEX. Ms. Walters agreed:

*The collaborate environment for teachers was huge. These students have been more prone to getting in trouble, so it was nice to be able to pick up the phone and share any issues I had with a student, or students, on any given day. Also, all of us teachers were able to meet more frequently and discuss the students. It was a welcome change to have such an open line of communication.*

The FLEX teachers pointed to a few situations in which a student was having difficulty at home but was not upfront about what he or she was encountering. The teachers were able to conduct a short meeting, or phone conversation, to discuss the student and how best to approach the situation. In almost every situation, one or more teachers were able to talk with the student and help them work through the problem. One such experience was shared by Ms. Carnegie:

*I remember when (anonymous student) got into a verbal altercation with his mom about a lie he told. You could see the pain on his face the next day, but he wouldn’t tell me what was going on. Thankfully, he had a really good relationship with another FLEX teacher. So, I called that teacher to share my observations about (anonymous student)’s mood.*
The teacher was able to sit with the student and talk it through. They called the student’s mom together and talked about the altercation with her. The rest of the day, that student looked like a 2-ton gorilla had been lifted off of his back.

The line of communication was not solely based on behavioral concerns. The FLEX teachers communicated about academic observations as well. As a result of their communication, teachers were able to use cross-curricular strategies to ensure FLEX students received more practice with specific content. For example, Ms. Thomas communicated with the Ms. Vanguard about content the FLEX students were struggling to understand. To help them grasp the material better, Ms. Vanguard adjusted the topic for the upcoming written assignment to be centered on the content they were struggling to understand in Ms. Thomas’s class. The writing assignment forced the students to research the science content, analyze the content, and write a detailed essay. When the Ms. Thomas re-assessed the students on that content, every student’s score improved. Ms. Thomas reflected on this experience:

It was so great when the students realized what happened. During this segment of the unit, they were oblivious. When they were re-assessed on the material and scored better, it was like a light bulb went off. The best part was that they did not feel betrayed or misled, they genuinely appreciated our efforts and expressed their appreciation.

The relationships developed within the cohort, both between teachers and between teachers and students, ensured that students received the proper types of support throughout the implementation of this intervention. Moreover, supports were not only limited to academic supports, as teachers provided social and emotional supports as well.
Students were Impacted by Negative Influences within the Cohort

The cohort model used for the FLEX program provided a variety of benefits to the students who participated, as outlined above. However, the cohort model also created some unintended consequences. During the development phase of this intervention, the AR team evaluated the amount of time the FLEX students would be spending together each day; but, the discussion did not include how that time together could impact them in a negative way. The AR team hypothesized that the amount of support being provided by the teachers would offset any negative influences. Unfortunately, feedback gathered during focus group sessions, in addition to responses to the Post-Implementation Survey, outlined the negative effects of a cohort model.

Travelling from Class to Class Together. In a traditional course schedule for a ninth-grade student, the possibility exists where some students may be in multiple courses together. However, it is not a common occurrence. For FLEX students, they were in five courses with the same student population. Additionally, the transition from one course to another was done as a group due to FLEX students having almost identical schedules. While it was a short time between each class, only six minutes, the FLEX teachers noted that six minutes is enough time for a ninth-grade student to make a poor decision. Mr. McElroy described how six minutes can be an eternity for a FLEX student:

*The class after mine is right across the hall, so it should take each student about 30 seconds to get there. But, that was rarely ever the case unless I walked them over myself.*

*I would see students dispersing all over that area of the school and then barely make it to the next class on time. In reality, each student had roughly 5 ½ minutes of time to hang out in the halls. That is not a good situation for these students.*

Upon hearing Mr. McElroy’s comment, I followed up with the following question:
So, as a result of this extra time in the halls, did you notice an increase in the FLEX students exhibiting inappropriate behaviors during class changes?

Ms. Lawrence responded:

Yes, there was much more behavior management required during class changes for this group. Luckily, we have a strong teacher presence in the hallways between courses, so the students were probably too scared to do anything really bad. Most of their behaviors were limited to minor stuff that could be handled quickly.

Ms. Walters continued:

It was not just inappropriate behaviors they exhibited during that time. The drama carried over from one class, into the hallway, then into the next class. Most students can get into a dramatic situation with another student, but then do not see that student until the next day. These students would get into arguments or get mad at each other, then would have to see each other six minutes later in the next class. It only made those situations worse!

When asked how those types of situations impacted the classroom, the FLEX teachers explained that situations would escalate quickly. While the relationships between teachers and students was stronger and one built on trust and respect, the student relationship were not the same.
In response to the statement, “The cohort-style transition program creates an environment where students and teachers treat each other with respect,” the average response score was a 3.0. Ms. Vanguard elaborated:

In some situations, students were mean to each other. They would call each other stupid or slow because they were in FLEX. Some of the comments made during FLEX class were things I never hear in my traditional classes.

A follow-up question was asked:

What do you think led to that interaction between the students?

Mr. Anderson responded:

I feel like the cohort model created the situation where students were too comfortable with each other. They were desensitized to each other’s feelings from being around each other so much, they felt like they could say anything to each other.
I then asked:

*Being that familiar with each other, did it cause some students to participate in behaviors later in the semester that they would avoid earlier in the semester?*

Several teachers responded emphatically, and almost in unison:

*Absolutely!*

The feedback provided by the teachers pushed the discussion further into the behavior management piece of FLEX.

Contrary to what the AR team initially thought, the support and monitoring by the FLEX teachers did not compensate for the extended interaction between the students. Teachers were clear that they felt instruction was impacted in a negative way. Their responses to the statement, “Since the implementation of this transition program, student behavior does not interfere with instruction,” supported their statements in the focus group sessions by averaging a response score of 2.7.

![Figure 11. Post-Implementation Survey Responses: Behavior’s Impact on Instruction](image-url)

*Figure 11. Post-Implementation Survey Responses: Behavior’s Impact on Instruction*
When asked to describe what they observed in the classroom, several teachers indicated that students were afraid to ask questions, make comments, or engage in class for fear of being verbally scolded by other students. Even though each student was encouraged by their teacher to participate, it was evident that each student valued their peers’ opinion of them more than the teacher’s opinion.

**Less Interaction with Older Peers.** With only having two classes outside of the FLEX program each day, students interacted with older peers much less than their ninth-grade, non-FLEX counterparts. The AR team felt strongly that less interaction with older peers would be a good thing for the FLEX students. We believed that less interaction with older peers would create an environment where they felt more comfortable and not encounter peer pressure as much. The FLEX teachers assured the AR team that the FLEX students did seem more comfortable in the cohort environment and encountered less peer pressure from older students. However, the AR team did not consider the benefits that could be gained from the FLEX students interacting with older peers. Ms. Lawrence detailed the shortcomings:

*The FLEX students did not have any older peers that could act as a mentor. All of their interactions with older students occurred within two class periods or in the hallways. There was no older student to provide them mentoring or guidance from a student’s perspective. There was no one to say, “I’ve been through this…” or “Learn from my mistakes...”.*

Mr. McElroy agreed:

*They heard positive stuff from us almost all day, every day. However, there is something to be said for students mentoring other students. We provided adult mentors through their*
Tools class but mentoring still seems to be more impactful coming from a student who has been through it. We didn’t have that for them.

Additionally, FLEX teachers expressed a desire for older peers to be involved with FLEX for reasons other than mentoring. Ms. Thomas shared:

There are academic benefits to having older students in the FLEX classroom. They have been through these courses, so they could potentially provide academic support in addition to the social and emotional support.

Asked to provide more detail, Ms. Thomas continued:

We grouped low-achieving students into the same cohort for five class periods a day.

There are ramifications to doing that. If I am helping one student, and another student needs help, there is no one to do that. That other student has to wait for me.

Consequently, that now becomes more of a behavior issue as that other student now has time to kill.

A follow-up question was asked:

Did anyone else experience this? Did it cause more problems than a traditional classroom?

Mr. Anderson elaborated:

Yeah, it did. It was a regular occurrence for kids to be sitting around waiting for me to provide academic support. Since these students have been lower-achieving through 8th grade, they need more support. The smaller class size allows me to provide more support than a traditional class, but I still don’t think I was able to provide adequate support for EVERY student.
Ms. Walters agreed:

_There were several times where I would say, “(anonymous student) get to work.” That student would typically respond with, “I don’t know how to do this.” So, they would begin interacting with their peers, which would cause me to stop helping and address the behavior issues it had become._

The AR team took careful note of what was being said so this could be addressed in future planning of a program like this. Behavior management and the amount of interaction between FLEX students was not given enough consideration during the development of the cohort-style transition program. That lack of consideration ultimately led to powerful negative influences within the cohort.

**Non-academic Components of Transition Program Created Issues.** Providing students who have been placed at-risk with non-academic support was a focus of the AR team. As a result of this focus, the AR team incorporated non-graded activities to help students develop skills they would need after high school. The intention was clear, but the result of the non-graded activities was not what the AR team had hoped. Ms. Lawrence explained:

_It was difficult to get these students to see the benefit of the mentoring or the career related activities. It was very clear early on that, if a grade was not attached to an activity, they were not going to put forth any effort. As the semester progressed, they just stopped completing the activities._

A follow-up question was asked:

_Did you change your approach when presenting them with the non-graded activities? For instance, did you explain the benefit?_
Ms. Lawrence responded:

*I tried anything and everything. Whatever I said went in one ear and out the other.*

Another follow-up was asked:

*Are there any other factors you all feel played a role in them not completing the non-graded activities?*

Ms. Carnegie responded:

*Honestly, I think the students in FLEX are too young to complete mentoring and career-related activities. Like we mentioned before, if it was peer mentoring, I think it would have made more impact. But, the adult mentoring was viewed as just another thing we have to do. These types of activities are probably best for students in 11th or 12th grade, not 9th grade students.*

As a result of the feedback provided above, the teachers started to use the non-academic course as a study hall rather than a career preparatory class. The mentoring sessions continued throughout this study, but the career-related activities were slowly phased out. Ms. Vanguard noticed a difference in the students after the non-graded activities were removed:

*As we slowly removed the career-related activities and begin incorporating more academic-related activities, there was an improvement in behavior and work completion for the non-academic course. Additionally, we, the teachers, noticed an improvement in their understanding of the material in each course as they received more academic reinforcement and remediation through the Tools course.*

The AR team did not find the negative impacts of the cohort model to be a surprise as they are similar to what is experienced in a traditional class. However, the AR team did not understand the full scope of negative impacts that could result from using a cohort model. There was too
much emphasis placed on the role of the teacher and not enough placed on peer-to-peer interaction within the cohort. In order to limit these negative impacts in future years, more discussion and analysis needs to be conducted regarding best practices when implementing a cohort-style transition program.

**Research Question 2: Observable Trends in Attendance, Behavior, and Academic Achievement**

Due to the nature of the intervention, this action research study attempted to examine how participating in the transition program would impact observable trends in attendance, achievement, and behavior. To properly analyze the impact within each dataset, the impact on observable trends for the *In-Program* group were compared to the impact on observable trends for the *Not-In-Program* group. The statistical analysis of data led to the emergence of four main ideas associated with this research question:

1. Academic achievement trends were positively impacted for the *In-Program* group across all three content areas.
2. Tardy events increased for both groups of students as compared to previous school years.
3. Absent events decreased for both groups of students as compared to previous school years.
4. Behavior events remained consistent for both groups of students as compared to previous school years.
Table 5

Observable Trends

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Findings from Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. What trends in behavior, attendance, and academic achievement are observed in</td>
<td>a. Academic achievement trends were positively impacted across all three content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ninth-grade students placed at-risk who participate in a cohort-style transition</td>
<td>areas for In-Program students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>program as compared to those who do not participate?</td>
<td>b. Tardy events increased for both groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Absent events decreased for both groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Behavior events remained virtually the same over the time period analyzed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Math

Descriptive statistics were run to assess the minimum, maximum, mean, standard deviation, skew and kurtosis for each group across test administration. Findings revealed that 8th grade math mean scores ($M = 75.82$) for students not in the program were higher than 7th and 9th grade students. For the In-Program group, 9th grade math students produced the highest mean score ($M = 83.32$) of the three students group (Table 6).

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Students Across Test Administrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>7th Grade Math</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>74.7727</td>
<td>5.08903</td>
<td>0.372</td>
<td>-0.841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8th Grade Math</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>75.8182</td>
<td>6.8427</td>
<td>0.425</td>
<td>-0.714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9th Grade Math</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>69.4545</td>
<td>16.32622</td>
<td>-1.184</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>7th Grade Math</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>74.7727</td>
<td>4.94669</td>
<td>-0.757</td>
<td>0.351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8th Grade Math</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>74.8182</td>
<td>4.94384</td>
<td>0.921</td>
<td>0.428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9th Grade Math</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>83.3182</td>
<td>7.68664</td>
<td>-0.343</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 22$, Standard Error Skew = 0.491, Standard Error Kurtosis = 0.953
Assumptions for Repeated Measures ANOVA--Math

Three assumptions were examined to ensure test results could be appropriately inferred; these three assumptions are: (a) independent observation, (b) normality, and (c) sphericity. The independent observation assumption was assumed given that the two groups (Not-in-Program, In-Program) consisted of different students. Normality was tested using Shapiro-Wilk test statistics and examining residuals. Findings revealed that five of the six distributions were normally distributed and met the normality assumption. However, the 9th grade Not-in-Program distribution did not meet the assumption (Table 7).

Table 7

Test of Normality for Each Group Across Test Administrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Shapiro-Wilk</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Statistic</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th Grade Math</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.949</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.946</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th Grade Math</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.946</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.913</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.054</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th Grade Math</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.879</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.977</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.861</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Test of Sphericity for within subject Math Test Scores indicates a significant result; Chi-square $\chi^2 = 14.85$ (2), $p = 0.001$ (Table 8). This means that the variances of the differences between all possible pairs of within-subject conditions (i.e., levels of the independent variable) are equal. Accordingly, the Huynh-Feldt correction will be used to interpret within subjects’ findings in the final analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).
Table 8

**Sphericity Test for Within Subject Math Test Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Within Subjects Effect</th>
<th>Mauchly's $W$</th>
<th>Approx. Chi-Square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Epsilon $b$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Math Test Scores</td>
<td>0.696</td>
<td>14.85</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 44$

**Math Test Results**

Results from the profile test revealed a non-significant difference within math test administrations. That is, participant scores did not significantly vary across 7th, 8th, and 9th grade math tests; Huynh-Felt (1.618) = .596, $p = .520$. However, there was a significant difference across administration of math tests (7th 8th and 9th grade) between students *Not-in-Program* and those students *In-Program*; Wilks' Lambda ($\lambda$) (2, 41) = .674, $F = 9.89$, $p < .001$. Figure 12 reveals the relationship between math test administrations and group status. Students not in the program experienced a decline in math test scores across school years compared to students in the program, who experienced an increase in math test scores.
Descriptive statistics were run to assess the minimum, maximum, mean, standard deviation, skew, and kurtosis for each group across science test administrations. Findings revealed that 7th grade math mean scores ($M = 79.68$) for students not in the program were higher than 8th and 9th grade students in the same program. For the In-Program group, 9th grade math students produced the highest mean score ($M = 80.18$) of the three test groups (Table 9).

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics for Students Across Science Test Administrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>7th Grade Science</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>79.682</td>
<td>8.237</td>
<td>-0.631</td>
<td>1.311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8th Grade Science</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>75.727</td>
<td>9.417</td>
<td>-0.684</td>
<td>0.407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9th Grade Science</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>71.500</td>
<td>10.853</td>
<td>-0.733</td>
<td>-0.171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>7th Grade Science</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>77.727</td>
<td>4.753</td>
<td>1.074</td>
<td>3.138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8th Grade Science</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>74.182</td>
<td>4.727</td>
<td>0.086</td>
<td>2.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9th Grade Science</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>80.182</td>
<td>7.563</td>
<td>0.181</td>
<td>-0.301</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 22, Standard Error Skew = 0.491, Standard Error Kurtosis = 0.953
Assumptions for Repeated Measures ANOVA--Science

Three assumptions were examined: (a) independent observation, (b) normality, and (c) sphericity. The independent observation assumption was assumed given that the two groups (Not-in-Program, In-Program) consisted of different students. Normality was tested using Shapiro-Wilk test statistics and evaluation of residuals. Findings revealed that five of the six distributions were normally distributed and met the normality assumption; \( p > .05 \). However, the 7th grade In-Program distribution did not meet the assumption \( p < .05 \) (Table 10).

Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Shapiro-Wilk Statistic</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science7</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.933</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.910</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science8</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.956</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.928</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science9</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.927</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.978</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.879</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This is a lower bound of the true significance.

Test of Sphericity for within subject Science Test Scores indicates a significant result; Chi-square \( \chi^2 = 9.198 \) (2), \( p = 0.001 \) (Table 11). This means that the variances of the differences between all possible pairs of within-subject conditions (i.e., levels of the independent variable) are equal. Accordingly, the Huynh-Feldt correction was used to interpret within subjects’ findings in the final analysis (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2013).
Table 11

Sphericity Test for Within Subject Science Test Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Within Subjects Effect</th>
<th>Mauchly's W</th>
<th>Approx. Chi-Square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Epsilon b</th>
<th>Greenhouse-Geisser</th>
<th>Huynh-Feldt</th>
<th>Lower-bound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science Test Scores</td>
<td>0.799</td>
<td>9.198</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.833</td>
<td>0.884</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 44$

Science Test Results

Results from the profile test revealed a significant difference within science test administrations. That is, participant science scores did significantly vary across 7th, 8th, and 9th grade tests; Huynh-Felt (1.767) = 3.875, $p = .03$. In addition, there was a significant difference across administration of science tests (7th 8th and 9th grade) between students Not-in-Program and those students In-Program; Wilks' Lambda ($\lambda$) (2, 41) = .743, $F = 7.109$, $p = .002$. Figure 13 reveals the relationship between science test administrations and group status. Students not in the program experienced a decline in science test scores across school years compared to student in the program.
Descriptive statistics were run to assess the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation, for each group across English test administration. Findings revealed that 7th grade English mean scores ($M = 78.86$) for students not in the program were higher than 8th and 9th grade Not-in-Program English students. For the In-Program group, 7th grade English students produced the highest mean score ($M = 78.95$) compared to 8th and 9th grade students (Table 12).

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>English 7</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>78.864</td>
<td>6.985</td>
<td>-0.863</td>
<td>0.925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English 8</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>76.546</td>
<td>8.584</td>
<td>-1.229</td>
<td>2.787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English 9</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>70.500</td>
<td>8.489</td>
<td>-0.175</td>
<td>0.501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>English 7</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>78.955</td>
<td>3.748</td>
<td>1.424</td>
<td>2.597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English 8</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>78.500</td>
<td>3.973</td>
<td>0.208</td>
<td>-0.520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English 9</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>76.273</td>
<td>5.667</td>
<td>0.901</td>
<td>0.563</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 22, Standard Error Skew = 0.491, Standard Error Kurtosis = 0.953*
Assumptions for Repeated Measures ANOVA--English

Three assumptions were examined: (a) independent observation, (b) normality, and (c) sphericity. The independent observation assumption was assumed given the two groups (Not-in-Program, In-Program) consisted of different students. Normality was tested using Shapiro-Wilk test statistics and evaluation of residuals. Findings revealed that five of the six distributions were normally distributed and met the normality assumption. However, the 7th grade In-Program distribution did not meet the assumption; $p < .05$ (Table 13).

Table 13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Shapiro-Wilk Statistic</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English7</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.937</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.887</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English8</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.912</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.964</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English9</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.967</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.912</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.053</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This is a lower bound of the true significance.

Test of Sphericity for within subject Science Test Scores indicated a significant result; Chi-square $\chi = 9.198$ (2), $p = 0.001$ (Table 14). This means that the variances of the differences between all possible pairs of within-subject conditions (i.e., levels of the independent variable) are equal. Accordingly, the Huynh-Feldt correction was used to interpret within subjects’ findings in the final analysis (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2013).
Table 14

*Sphericity Test for Within Subject English Test Score*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Within Subjects Effect</th>
<th>Mauchly's W</th>
<th>Approx. Chi-Square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Epsilon b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science Test Scores</td>
<td>0.799</td>
<td>9.198</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.884</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 44$

**English Test Results**

Results from the profile test revealed a significant difference within English test administrations. That is, participant English scores did significantly vary across 7th, 8th, and 9th grade tests; Huynh-Felt $F (1.767) = 17.917, p < .001$. In addition, there was a significant difference across administration of English tests (7th 8th and 9th grade) between students *Not-in-Program* and those students *In-Program*; Wilks' Lambda ($\lambda$) $(2, 41) = .841, F = 3.8897, p = .028$. Figure 14 reveals the relationship between English test administrations and group status. Students not in the program experienced a greater decline in English test scores across school years compared to student in the program.
Figure 14. Multivariate graph depicting the relationship between English administrations.

Total Tardy Events

Total Tardy events were derived by adding up unexcused and excused tardy events for each of the three school years (7th, 8th, and 9th grade). Three Total Tardy event scores were then used as the within subjects’ factor for the profile analysis. The between subjects’ factor was Group Status (Not-in-Group, In-Group). Descriptive statistics were run to assess the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation, for each group across three school years. Findings revealed that 9th grade Tardy event mean scores for students not in the program (M = 7.41) were higher than 7th and 8th grade students Not-in-Program. For the In-Program group, 8th grade students produced the highest mean Total Tardy score (M = 9.91) compared to 7th and 9th grade students (Table 15).
Table 15

*Descriptive Statistics for Students Across Tardy Events*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>Tardy 7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.818</td>
<td>4.847</td>
<td>1.425</td>
<td>3.233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tardy 8</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.682</td>
<td>4.775</td>
<td>1.684</td>
<td>4.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tardy 9</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7.409</td>
<td>5.612</td>
<td>0.999</td>
<td>0.723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>Tardy 7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4.727</td>
<td>7.989</td>
<td>2.187</td>
<td>4.298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tardy 8</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>9.909</td>
<td>10.628</td>
<td>1.730</td>
<td>2.679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tardy 9</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5.773</td>
<td>7.451</td>
<td>1.775</td>
<td>2.793</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 22, Standard Error Skew = 0.491, Standard Error Kurtosis = 0.953

Assumptions for Repeated Measures ANOVA—Total Tardy Events

Three assumptions were examined: (a) independent observation, (b) normality, and (c) sphericity. The independent observation assumption was assumed given the two groups (*Not-in-Program, In-Program*) consisted of different students. Normality was tested using Shapiro-Wilk test statistics and evaluation of residuals. Findings revealed that all six distributions for Total Tardy events were not normally distributed. This suggests that the normality assumption was not met. Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) report that violation of the normality assumption may not necessarily affect the outcome; \( p_i < .05 \) (Table 16).

Table 16

*Test of Normality for Each Group Across Tardy Events*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Within Group</th>
<th>Between Group</th>
<th>Shapiro-Wilk Statistic</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TltTardies7</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.875</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.640</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TltTardies8</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.849</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.793</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TltTardies9</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.920</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.767</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This is a lower bound of the true significance.
Test of Sphericity for within subject Total Tardy events indicated a non-significant result; Chi-square $\chi = 9.148$ (2), $p = 0.633$ (Table 17). This means that the variances of the differences between all possible pairs of within-subject conditions (i.e., levels of the independent variable) are equal.

Table 17

_Sphericity Test for Within Subject Tardy Events_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Within Subjects Effect</th>
<th>Mauchly's W</th>
<th>Approx. Chi-Square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Epsilon b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Greenhouse-Geisser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science Test Scores</td>
<td>0.978</td>
<td>.914</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.633</td>
<td>0.978</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 44$

_Tardy Events Results_

Results from the profile test revealed a significant difference within Total Tardy event periods. That is, participant Total Tardy events did not significantly vary across 7th, 8th, and 9th grade periods; Wilks Lambda ($\lambda$) $F (2, 41) = 1.835$, $p = .172$. In addition, there was a significant difference across Tardy event periods (7th 8th and 9th grade) between students Not-in-Program and students In-Program; Wilks' Lambda ($\lambda$) $(2, 41) = .774$, $F = 6.002$, $p = .005$. Figure 15 reveals the relationship between Total Tardy events across years and group status. For the In-Program group—8th grade, two students exhibited significantly more tardy events (i.e. outliers) compared to the rest of the 8th grade In-Program group. Students in both groups generally experienced an increase in tardy events across school years.
Total Absent Events

Total Absent events were derived by adding up unexcused and excused absent events for each of the three school years (7th, 8th, and 9th grade). Three Total Absent events were then used as the within subjects’ factor for the profile analysis. The between subjects’ factor was Group Status (Not-in-Group, In-Group). Descriptive statistics were run to assess the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation, for each group across three school years. Findings revealed that 9th grade absent event mean scores for students not in the program (M = 90.05) were higher than 7th and 8th grade students Not-in-Program. For the In-Program group, 8th grade students produced the highest mean Total Absent events (M = 89.546) compared to 7th and 9th grade students (Table 18).
Table 18

*Descriptive Statistics for Students Across Total Absent Events*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>Tardy 7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>72.273</td>
<td>65.490</td>
<td>1.627</td>
<td>2.222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tardy 8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>82.409</td>
<td>55.115</td>
<td>0.967</td>
<td>0.131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tardy 9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>90.046</td>
<td>69.527</td>
<td>1.388</td>
<td>0.942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>Tardy 7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>56.136</td>
<td>46.810</td>
<td>0.674</td>
<td>-0.581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tardy 8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>89.546</td>
<td>64.087</td>
<td>0.810</td>
<td>0.233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tardy 9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>50.273</td>
<td>33.060</td>
<td>1.204</td>
<td>1.782</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Assumptions for Repeated Measures ANOVA—Total Absent Events**

Three assumptions were examined: (a) independent observation, (b) normality, and (c) sphericity. The independent observation assumption was assumed given the two groups (*Not-in-Program, In-Program*) consisted of different students. Normality was tested using Shapiro-Wilk test statistics and evaluation of residuals. Findings revealed that all but 8th grade *In-Program* absent events were normally distributed. This suggests that the normality assumption was not met. Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) report that violation of the normality assumption may not necessarily affect the outcome given the robustness of the statistics used (Table 19).

Table 19

*Test of Normality for Each Group Across Total Absent Events*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Shapiro-Wilk Statistic</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TltAbsences7</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.811</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.911</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TltAbsences8</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.894</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.936</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TltAbsences9</td>
<td>Not-in-Program</td>
<td>0.812</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Program</td>
<td>0.899</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.028</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Test of Sphericity for within subject Total Absent events indicated a non-significant result; Chi-square $\chi = .112 (2)$, $p = 0.945$ (Table 20). This means that the variances of the differences between all possible pairs of within-subject conditions (i.e., levels of the independent variable) are equal.

Table 20

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Within Subjects Effect</th>
<th>Mauchly's W</th>
<th>Approx. Chi-Square</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Epsilon b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science Test Scores</td>
<td>0.997</td>
<td>0.112</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.945</td>
<td>0.997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 44$

Absent Event Results

Results from the profile test revealed a significant difference within Total Absent Event years. That is, participant Total Absent events did significantly vary across 7th, 8th, and 9th grade periods; Wilks Lambda ($\lambda$) = .841, $F (2,41) = 3.88$, $p = .029$. In addition, there was a significant difference across Total Absent event periods (7th, 8th and 9th grade) between students Not-in-Program and those students In-Program; Wilks' Lambda ($\lambda$) (2, 41) = , .822, $F =4.453$, $p = .018$. Figure 16 reveals the relationship between Total Absent events across years and group status. For the In-Program group—8th grade, two students had significantly higher number of Absent events (i.e. outliers) compared to the rest of the 8th grade In-Program group. Students in the In-Program group generally experienced a decrease in absent events across school years compared to the Not-in-Program group.
Results showed that a cohort-style transition program may not have a significant impact on behavior trends for students who participate. Responses from the survey and focus group sessions echoed empirical literature that behavior and attendance issues occur at a higher frequency in ninth-grade (McIntosh et al., 2008; Sloat et al., 2007) as compared to tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade. However, trends observed in behavior data collected from ninth-grade for each student in the program, and students not in the program, indicated that behavior issues occurred at the same rate, or at an increased rate, for both groups as compared to the data collected from seventh- and eighth-grade. Thus, contrary to literature informing this study, participating in a transition program had little to no impact on the frequency of behavior issues.

In addition to looking at how the cohort model impacted at-risk students’ transition to high school, this study sought to understand how participating in an AR team affected the implementation of the intervention. Based on the feedback provided by the AR team, leadership at Jefferson High School may be able to determine whether or not action research is the proper approach to use when investigating solutions to future problems. Feedback was obtained from the AR team through focus group sessions and AR team meetings with the following themes emerging from this study:

1. Participation in an action research team led the AR team members to take more ownership of the cohort-style transition program.
2. The AR team members felt more respected by building leadership for their role in developing and implementing the intervention.
3. The inability to make significant changes during the implementation of the intervention caused feelings of frustration for AR team members.

Table 21

Impact on Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Findings from Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. How does one's participation in an action research team affect the implementation of a transition program for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk?</td>
<td>a. Participation in an action research team led to more ownership of the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. AR team members felt more respected by building leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Inability to make significant changes during intervention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participation in an Action Research Team Led to More Ownership of the Program

In the early stages of the development process for the FLEX program, volunteers were unsure as to what exactly they were being asked to do. As a result, the first AR team meeting was centered on educating the AR team members on what action research is and the purpose for conducting an action research study. At the conclusion of the first meeting the AR team members were asked, “what component of an action research study are you most excited about; what component is most concerning?” Ms. Vanguard replied:

*The most exciting thing to me is that we will play an active role throughout the entire study. My feedback and my actions will have a direct impact on this intervention. Whether it succeeds or fails is not dependent upon people we don’t know, it’s dependent upon us and that’s great. My only concern is whether or not we’ll be given full autonomy or if we will be limited by decision makers in the building.*

Mr. Anderson responded:

*I agree with Ms. Vanguard. I have always wanted to make a bigger impact and feel that this is what I have been looking for. I will be in the thick of it with the members of this team, trying to impact a group of students in a positive way.*

Mr. McElroy elaborated:

*This is our program. We are creating it and we are responsible for making sure it’s done right. Who wouldn’t want to do that?*

As a whole, the AR team members shared that they were excited about being able to be actively involved in an intervention geared toward students who have shown a higher need for supports than other students. Ms. Carnegie expressed her thoughts:
I have been saying for years that something more needs to be done for these students. Unfortunately, I feel as though my feedback was not valued or heard. I felt compelled to volunteer to assist with this intervention to ensure my voice was heard and these students were getting the help they need.

The AR team shared that they were asked several times over the previous few school years to provide feedback as to what more could be done for the students at Jefferson High School. Initially, the AR team members were happy to provide their insight, but as time went on and nothing changed, the surveys were viewed as an attempt to keep the staff happy, with the responses often discarded by building leaders. However, participating in an action research study such as this allowed them to be a central figure throughout the program’s implementation, ensuring that their feedback was heard and taken into consideration.

More Investment into the Program and Its Students. During the course of this study, AR team members expressed a willingness to do whatever it took to ensure the intervention was successful. Team members were conducting impromptu meetings, analyzing student progress, reading supplementary literature, and completing additional tasks without being prompted. AR team members were asked, “Why are you putting so much time and effort into this program?” Ms. Thomas was the first to respond:

If we don’t put this much effort into this program, we can’t evaluate its true impact on these students. I didn’t volunteer to participate so I could give 50% effort. These students need more support, that much we know. However, we don’t always know the types of support they need. We have to go above and beyond to identify and implement the types of supports these students need.
Ms. Lawrence added:

*These students who have been placed at-risk have a higher chance of not graduating or graduating on time, right? This type of program can help them get on the right track and avoid becoming a statistic. If I didn’t do everything in my power, I would be doing these students, and my fellow colleagues, a disservice.*

Mr. McElroy agreed:

*We are attempting to create a strong program for these students. The stuff we are doing (i.e. meeting with the other team members, reading articles, analyzing student progress), can only make the program better for these students. While we may be putting in more work than the average teacher here at Jefferson, I truly believe it is worth the time and effort.*

AR team members were adamant that they aspire to help every student be successful, but they felt a special connection to the students in the FLEX program due to each student’s propensity for academic and social struggles. If AR team members did not invest more of their time and energy into the FLEX program, they felt the program, and its students, would be considered a failure.

**AR Team Members Felt More Respected by Building Leadership**

The AR team’s ability to implement an intervention such as FLEX cannot be done without approval from building leadership. Initially, hesitations were expressed by leaders as to the legitimacy of a cohort-style transition program and Jefferson’s capacity for implementing such a program with fidelity. Throughout the development and early stages of implementation, AR team members played a crucial role in ensuring building leaders understood the purpose of a cohort-style transition program and the AR team’s reason for structuring the program this way.
Ultimately, approval was granted as a result of each team member’s individual effort in 
describing the program’s intended impact on students who have been placed at-risk.

**Input from AR Team Members was Valued.** As previously stated, AR team members 
 felt that building leadership did not always hear, or value, feedback provided by the staff at 
Jefferson. Many of the team members felt that participating in this action research study would 
raise their profile within the building. Additionally, the majority of AR team members 
anticipated more face time with building leaders throughout the study. As a result, team members 
 felt more face time with leaders would give them an open forum to provide more detailed 
feedback, ensuring their opinions were heard and would allow them to earn more respect from 
Jefferson’s leaders. Mr. Anderson shared his thoughts:

> *I think participating in this study gave me an opportunity to show our leaders in the 
building that I am more than just a classroom teacher. There were times where I would 
make a comment or answer a question and I could see them react in a surprising way. It 
was almost as if they were thinking, “I didn’t think he was capable of doing that or 
saying that.”*

As the development phase turned into the implementation phase, Ms. Walters noted a difference 
in the interactions between the AR team members and Jefferson’s leaders:

> *It was a great feeling. Our leaders began asking us more questions about the way things 
were going at Jefferson instead of focusing only on FLEX. I could tell they started to 
understand that we could provide valuable feedback as it pertains to the school and our 
students.*
Mr. Anderson concurred:

*There was definitely a different approach by our leaders. They really began to respect us and what we were accomplishing. At the beginning, our leaders were very investigatory with their questions and comments. Once the intervention started and they saw what was occurring, their approach with us became one in which they were more supportive.*

Ms. Walters followed:

*Absolutely. They were asking us questions and genuinely listening to our responses. As it pertains directly to FLEX, they loosened the reigns and let us make decisions without having to consult with them first, like we had to in the beginning.*

Prior to participating in this action research study, team members often felt frustrated and invisible due to lack of acknowledgement when providing feedback to the building’s leaders. AR team members expressed that the change in approach by leaders at Jefferson High School empowered them to work harder and caused them to feel like a valued member of the staff.

**Leadership Opportunities.** Members of the AR team were honest when asked about their reasons for participating in this study. For almost every team member, the chance to work with the selected population was their motivating factor. Ms. Carnegie elaborated:

*At first, I was not sure I would want to do something like this. But, when I learned more about the study and who the intervention would be targeting, I jumped at the opportunity.*

Ms. Vanguard agreed with Ms. Carnegie:

*That was the number one factor for my participation. I knew this subset of students needed more help, but I never had the ability to provide more help. This study, and the FLEX program, was giving me that chance.*
However, a few team members expressed a desire to use their participation as a springboard into more leadership opportunities at Jefferson High School. Aspirations of gaining a promotion or impacting change at a greater level were detailed by Mr. Anderson:

*I’ll be honest, I do want to be a leader in the near future. In order to prove myself worthy of a leadership position, I knew I had to get involved and showcase my leadership skills. In my mind, being a leader on this AR team was a good starting point for me.*

I asked him for further explanation:

*In what ways did this study allow you to showcase your leadership skills?*

Mr. Anderson responded:

*I volunteered for tasks that I normally am not responsible for in this building. By completing those tasks and working with a team to get them done, I felt that I was proving to the leaders in this building that I do have leadership potential. My hope was that they would not look at me as simply a classroom teacher, but someone who could lead and manage others.*

Ms. Walters had the same aspirations:

*I looked at this study as an opportunity to work closely with decision makers here at Jefferson. I would be able to engage in conversations with leaders that I normally don’t get to interact with. Also, they would get to hear me provide input about something other than the content I teach.*

I followed up by asking Ms. Walters if she hoped to be a department chair or administrator. She responded:

*I am not necessarily worried a specific title. I just want to impact our school, and our students, on a greater level. I feel that I have some really good ideas but have not had the*
avenue to share those ideas. I looked at this study as my opportunity to share my ideas and force leaders to look at me in a different way.

I then asked:

What do you mean by “a different way?”

Ms. Walters answered:

As a leader. Someone who can impact change. Someone who has good ideas. Not as someone who works from 8 AM to 4 PM and does this job to have the Summer off.

While each AR team member articulated it differently, the underlying motivating factor for participating in this study seemed to be the ability to lead, whether it meant leading change for a group of students, leading a team of people, or future leadership opportunities.

**Inability to Make Significant Changes During Intervention Created Frustration**

One benefit to conducting an action research study is the ability to make changes to the intervention, based on feedback gathered during the study. However, not all action research studies lend themselves to change as easily as others. This action research study implemented an intervention which allowed the participants to make changes as they saw fit. While FLEX teachers were able to make changes they felt were needed, the structure of the intervention prohibited the AR team from making significant changes. Upon reflection, AR team members agreed that the flexibility provided to teachers was beneficial to the teachers and students. On the other hand, the inability to make significant changes minimized the positive impact felt by students and teachers in FLEX.

**Flexibility to Make Small Changes.** Findings from this study indicated that each teacher’s ability to make changes on the fly created a more collaborative and supportive environment for those involved. FLEX teachers were able to alter the curriculum, slow the
pacing of the course, and use cross-curricular strategies to ensure the needs of each student were being met. Nonetheless, feedback from FLEX teachers indicated that the cohort model created problems that are not typically seen in a traditional classroom setting. In multiple situations, FLEX teachers requested specific changes to the structure of the program to alleviate some of the issues they were encountering. Unfortunately, the requested changes were not able to be made due to logistical challenges. Ms. Thomas expressed her frustrations early in the implementation phase:

*I think FLEX is accomplishing a lot so far. But, these kids do not need to spend so much time together. It’s like we’ve placed them back into an elementary school classroom. They are with each other almost the entire day.*

When asked about the changes she would make, Ms. Thomas provided the following:

*I would make sure these students have a different Instructional Focus and I would integrate them into the normal classroom setting for their support class. That would reduce the number of classes they have together.*

Ms. Walters provided another suggestion:

*I would do what Ms. Thomas said, but I would also get rid of the Tools course and put them into an academic class, like World Geography. That way they could earn a Social Studies credit.*

Understanding that changes could not be made this early in the intervention due to us being in school for only a few weeks, the FLEX program continued as originally planned, while documenting the suggested changes. At the conclusion of the first action research cycle, FLEX teachers were asked to provide their input as to how FLEX was operating. Ms. Lawrence was the first to provide a response:
We’ve got to make some schedule changes. As this semester has progressed, the drama within the student population of this cohort has only gotten worse. It’s impacting the learning environment and creating a lot of classroom management issues.

Mr. McElroy agreed, but focused on the academic impact:

The behavior issues are becoming more frequent, that is true, but it is more than that.

With all of these achieving at the same level, there is no peer support component in the classroom.

Ms. Vanguard continued:

They do not have any older peers to model proper skills. A number of the students are still stuck in their middle-school frame of mind. Older students can typically help them grow out of that stage, and we don’t have that in the FLEX classroom.

Using that feedback as a talking point, the curriculum assistant principal was consulted about the suggested changes. He shared that it was not possible to make the suggested changes due to the impact it would have on the master schedule. This information was shared with the AR team, who were then asked, “What are your thoughts?” Ms. Carnegie shared her opinion:

It is frustrating. The goal of this intervention is to do whatever we can for the students. From our perspective, we are telling you what needs to be done. But, what needs to be done, can’t be done. This limits our ability to support and help these students.

I asked the rest of the group if they agreed with Ms. Carnegie. They all nodded in agreement, with Mr. Anderson verbally supporting Ms. Carnegie:

I think the fact that we can’t make the necessary changes impacts this program in such a negative way. I do think it is great we have flexibility in the classroom, but the problems
we mentioned will only continue. I won't lie, my excitement for this program has died down a little bit after hearing that.

Ms. Lawrence followed up:

*It is deflating. I mean, we will continue to do what we do, but the students aren’t going to get everything they need.*

At the conclusion of this study, the FLEX teachers were asked if the aforementioned issues had improved, gotten worse, or remained the same. Ms. Thomas shared:

*The issues definitely got worse in my class. Behavior management became such a big part of the daily routine. I think everyone will agree that, academically, the kids got more support than the average student. However, the immature behaviors they displayed at the start of the year continued through the whole semester.*

Ms. Walters agreed:

*I just think we have to find some way to make a program like this more flexible. What I mean is, the teachers have flexibility, but the program itself is not flexible. As the students’ needs change during the school year, the program has to be able to change with them. We are not able to do that right now and it’s definitely limited the program’s potential.*

As the discussion continued, the FLEX teachers spoke highly of the freedom they were granted to make changes in the classroom. However, the excitement about their freedom was overshadowed by the fact that the program’s structure could not be altered. The AR team agreed that more exploration needs to be conducted in order to identify the types of changes that can be made to a cohort-style transition program during the school year. Being able to identify what
changes can occur will only strengthen the program and its impact on students who have been placed at-risk.

**Summary**

The findings from this action research study support empirical literature on the need for high-school transition programs. More specifically, a transition program that is structured to meet the needs of the students participating in the program may result in higher academic achievement and the development of stronger relationships with teachers and peers. The higher level of achievement could be accredited to the cohort structure in which students were able to receive personalized instruction and more academic support. However, without speaking to the students directly, the team cannot attribute the increase in student achievement directly to the students’ involvement in the program.

Data also indicated that using a cohort model for a transition program could cause an increase in the frequency of behavior incidents occurring within the classroom, while decreasing the number of absence and tardy events. Even though the students enrolled into the FLEX program were in class more often as compared to their counterparts who did not participate, behavior, teachers shared that the time spent addressing the daily behavior issues took time away from instruction and academic support opportunities. Therefore, FLEX teachers articulated a need to identify how to structure the transition program to limit the students’ opportunities for inappropriate behavior.

Findings from this study also indicated that AR team members felt more empowered and respected by their colleagues by participating in the action research study. Feeling more empowered and respected, team members reported feeling as if their voice was heard and valued. As a result, they took more ownership of the program itself and were willing to put more effort
into ensuring the intervention was implemented with fidelity. Lastly, participating in this action research study led to the teachers developing more in-depth relationships with their students. Due to these stronger relationships, FLEX teachers shared that they took more ownership in each student’s success, as they truly cared about each student.
CHAPTER 6
ANALYSIS, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this Action Research study was to use Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to inform the implementation of a cohort-style transition program for at-risk ninth grade students and analyze its effectiveness in preparing students for academic success. The research sought answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent does a cohort-style transition program impact the learning environment for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk?

2. What trends in behavior, attendance, and academic achievement are observed in ninth-grade students placed at-risk who participate in a cohort-style transition program as compared to those who do not participate?

3. How does one's participation in an action research team affect the implementation of a transition program for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk?

This chapter provides a summary of the findings drawn from an action research study conducted at Jefferson High School. Additionally, following the summary of the findings, three major conclusions are discussed, and implications are explored. Finally, recommendations are made for future research studies exploring transition programs for students who have been placed at-risk.

Analysis

The research questions in this study assisted the AR team in identifying the ways in which a cohort-style transition program impacted a specific subset of students’ transition from middle-school to Jefferson High School. The AR team consisted of a variety of educators with a
multitude of experience in providing academic, social, and emotional supports to high-school students. Through the application of action research, the team was able to use their extensive knowledge to better understand the types and levels of supports that are needed by students who have been placed at-risk as they transition to high school. Additionally, the team researched past and current transition practices, while further exploring theories on transition, to gain insight as to how transition programs have been implemented for students in ninth-grade. As a result, the action research process led to the creation of a unique framework for a cohort-style transition program which focused on providing students who have been placed at-risk additional supports not found in a traditional classroom setting.

As the framework for the transition program was discussed, each AR team member provided their insight as to how the myriad of supports could best be incorporated. Ultimately, the AR team devised a plan for implementation that included two cycles of action research. The two cycles of action research were designed with the school calendar in mind in order to provide the AR team the best opportunity at providing continuous, and proper, support for student transition. Interventions to be included in the transition program consisted of specific, and intentional, course scheduling, mentoring sessions, and career skill-building activities. The team used insight from surveys, focus group sessions, and student data to analyze the program’s effectiveness and provide suggestions for future transition programs based on a new understanding of the problem.

During the analysis phase of this study, team members were given the opportunity to independently evaluate each piece of data obtained from the survey results, focus group sessions, and student data. This approach, entitled member checking, occurs when research participants “are able to review the raw data, analyses, and reports derived from research procedures”
(Stringer, 2014, p. 93). Member checking is integral to the action research process as it is meant to alleviate bias from each individual researcher (Stringer, 2014). As it pertains to this study, AR team members qualify to engage in member checking due to their additional role as study participants. Once individuals had completed their evaluations of the data, group discussions were conducted to articulate findings for the study. The feedback and insight shared during these group discussions produced conclusions and implications which could inform future planning of transition practices at the school and district levels.

Conclusions

Findings from this project had an impact on the processes in place for transition programs which support the next cohort’s transition from middle- to high-school. Based on the findings from this study, Jefferson High School plans to evaluate and revise the FLEX program in order to align with the recommendations outlined by the action research team. Meetings have been scheduled by Jefferson’s leaders to discuss the aforementioned recommendations and facilitate dialogue related to transition practices in preparation for the next school year. As a result of these meetings, Jefferson’s leaders hope to identify which changes need to, and can, be implemented to create a stronger transition program for those students who are transitioning to high school and have been placed at-risk.

Conclusion 1 – A cohort-style transition program for students who have been placed at-risk might have a positive impact on the academic components of the learning environment, but a cohort model could lead to a higher frequency of non-academic issues.

The first research question centered on identifying the extent to which a cohort-style transition program impacted the learning environment for students who have been placed at-risk. Based on findings from this study, the AR team concluded that implementing a cohort-style
transition program for students who have been placed at-risk might have a positive impact on the academic components of the learning environment; however, a cohort model might lead to non-academic influences that impact the learning environment in a negative way. Empirical literature informing this study supported the notion that transition programs should be developed with the student in mind, ensuring that their needs are met (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Sloat, Audas, & Willms, 2007). Additional studies recommended that schools should be proactive in identifying students who may struggle in ninth-grade and begin providing supports to those students immediately upon their entrance into high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; McIntosh et al., 2008). These studies informed the development of the intervention and led to the decision to use a cohort model to target a specific population within this case study, students who have been placed at-risk.

This study found that the intervention, a cohort-style transition program for students who have been placed at-risk, created a learning environment that provided strong academic supports and led to a high level of engagement in the academic content. Response data from both the Post-Implementation Survey and focus group sessions indicates that this group of students received instruction that was specifically designed to fit their needs. As a result of this personalization, response data also suggests that students were more engaged during instruction. These results align with the literature supporting the need for a program that identifies struggling students early and creates an environment conducive to their success (Battin et al., 2000; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014; Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013).

Empirical literature informing this study did not identify specific consequences of grouping students who have been placed at-risk together, as previous studies focused on larger populations of students from varying backgrounds, achievement levels, and interests. This case
study found that teachers were forced to deal with non-academic issues within the cohort class on a more frequent basis as compared to their traditional classes. Response data from the Post-Implementation Survey and from focus groups shows that these non-academic issues did impact the learning environment in a negative way by interrupting instruction and creating situations for students to be disrespectful toward each other. However, the overall findings suggest that the positive impact on the learning environment created by a cohort-style transition program may outweigh the negative.

Conducting an action research case study within the organization at which the AR team is employed provided a unique opportunity for all team members to be actively engaged throughout the entire process. As a result, an intervention was created with the intention of providing a supportive, strong learning environment for students who have been placed at-risk, while using Nancy Schlossberg’s Transition Theory as its foundation. Seeing that the cohort structure did assist in creating a learning environment aligned with the AR team’s intention was exciting for all team members. However, future learning exists for Jefferson High School and the AR team as to how the negative impact outlined above could be addressed for future cohorts.

**Conclusion 2 – Implementing a cohort-style transition program might have a positive impact on academic achievement and attendance for students who have been placed at-risk.**

The second research question focused on comparing identifiable trends in attendance, behavior, and academic achievement for students who participated in a cohort-style transition program and students who did not participate. The results from this study led the AR team to conclude that a cohort-style transition program for students who have been placed at-risk may result in a higher level of academic achievement for students who participate. Academic
achievement data analyzed for Math, Science, and English courses during each participating student’s seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade school years indicated a more positive impact on achievement as compared to their non-participating at-risk peers. Students who participated in the transition program experienced an overall score increase in Math and Science as compared to their seventh- and eighth-grade scores; whereas, students who did not participate experienced a decrease in their overall score for the same courses. Both groups of students experienced a decline in English scores during the intervention as compared to their seventh- and eighth-grade scores, but students who participated in the program experienced a lesser decline than those that did not participate.

The results of our analysis echoes previous research, which found that the level of academic achievement decreases for most ninth-grade students as they transition from middle- to high-school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Benner, 2011; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; McIntosh et al., 2008; Neild, 2009). However, our results also aligned with literature that indicated students who participate in a transition program will experience a greater level of success than those students who do not participate (Roybal et al., 2014).

Additionally, results revealed that implementing a cohort-style transition program may have a positive impact on absent events for students who participate in the program, while having virtually no impact on tardy events. Findings from the analysis of attendance behavior supports empirical literature in that the number of total absent events and total tardy events increased as the students transitioned from middle- to high-school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Sloat et al., 2007; DeSocio et al., 2007). However, further analysis showed that students who participated in the transition program had a fewer number of total absent events during the intervention than their at-risk peers who did not participate in the intervention. Furthermore, the
number of total tardy events for each group occurred more frequently than the rate at which the events occurred during their seventh- and eighth-grade school years.

Overall, as demonstrated by this study and reinforced in the literature, there is a need to provide supports that could affect academic achievement in a positive way and address the factors, attendance and behavior, that could impact achievement negatively. Ninth-grade students have exhibited a tendency to earn lower grades, obtain more behavior referrals, and miss class more often than their older peers (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Georgia Appleseed, 2011). Therefore, the creation and implementation of a program which promotes attending class, behaving appropriately, and supporting academic achievement may create the best environment for ninth-grade students who have been placed at-risk.

Conclusion 3 – Participating in an action research team may allow team members the ability to identify and employ changes during implementation, resulting in a stronger intervention.

The third research question sought to understand how participating in an action research team would affect the implementation of a cohort-style transition program for students who have been placed at-risk. The literature clearly supports participation in an action research team as it allows team members to use a systematic process of inquiry aimed at addressing a specific area of concern (Hine, 2013; Sagor, 2011; Simons, 2013). Findings echoed the literature, as this study discovered that actively engaging with the intervention, via an action research team, created a valuable experience for team members. By utilizing a solutions-based approach, team members were able to obtain new knowledge and understanding as to how educational practices could be improved.
Responses obtained through the focus group sessions indicated that team members enjoyed the learning that occurred during the action research process. Team members were encouraged to examine the dynamics of their classroom, evaluate existing practices, and take risks to enact change. Echoing literature informing this study (Hine, 2013), several team members stated that they were able to learn new ideas and expand their pedagogical repertoire. Team members were adamant that the encouragement to foster and implement newly found practices into the cohort classroom created a strong link between practice and student achievement. Feeling empowered throughout the action research process, team members were able to make specific, actionable changes related to the teaching and learning occurring within the cohort classroom. Overall, this finding supports that value exists when participating in an action research team as active participation strengthens the intervention being implemented.

**Additional Considerations**

Findings from this study may play a role in informing organizational decision-makers who decide to explore implementing transition programming for their students. However, it is important to understand that results may not be replicated due to structural changes in organizations that create differences in the design of the program itself. Beyond the possible differences in design, it is imperative that organizations also ensure insider-research is conducted in an ethical manner. Coghlan and Brannick (2014) speak to these additional considerations and outline the impact that preunderstanding, role duality, and access can have on a research study if they are not adequately addressed.

**Preunderstanding**

According to Coghlan and Brannick (2014), preunderstanding refers to the knowledge, insights, and experiences a researcher has of an organization prior to engaging in an action
research study. As an insider-researcher, preunderstanding may provide you with certain advantages over someone who is not embedded within the organization. Value exists in possessing a higher level of knowledge about the culture and structure of an organization than an outsider (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). However, preunderstanding may create a situation in which the insider-researcher is unable to step back from their role within the organization in order to evaluate it appropriately.

In an attempt to limit the impact preunderstanding had on this action research study, feedback and insight was collected from participants with a varying level of knowledge and experiences within the organization. While each team member had their own level of preunderstanding, the discussions, analysis and reflections in which they participated provided an opportunity for the AR team to gain a more thorough perspective on the problem and the intervention. Utilizing a team approach, rather than one individual’s approach, helped to mitigate the impact preunderstanding had on this action research study.

**Role Duality**

As Brannick and Coghlan (2007) explain, role duality arises when the researcher becomes the researched, thus, adding an additional role to their already existing role within the organization. Difficulties can arise when the researcher’s role within the organization is perceived to be one of power. Even though the researcher may have a strong desire to influence change within the organization, colleagues could perceive their participation in a negative light, affecting the researcher’s ability to obtain valid and reliable data (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Therefore, it is imperative that the researcher manage organizational politics to maintain their credibility as an agent of change and as a political player within the organization.
During the duration of this study, my role within the organization changed multiple times, creating different experiences and expectations. At the outset of this process, my role within the organization was classroom teacher and department chair. In this position, I had no evaluative or administrative responsibilities, so colleagues felt they could confide in me without fear of consequence. My teaching colleagues viewed me as someone who was on the same level as them. As the study progressed, my role changed to Assistant Administrator. Almost immediately, the perception of me within the organization changed dramatically. While this new position did not provide me any evaluative responsibilities, some of my colleagues became fearful that our discussions would be shared with the administrative team. As focus group sessions and AR team meetings were conducted, I worked to build trust with the team members, so they were comfortable sharing their honest opinions. Ultimately, I feel that my time spent as a teacher and department chair helped to mitigate the team members’ fears about their feedback remaining confidential. However, it is important to understand that the team members’ initial fears could impact the results.

Access

Brannick and Coghlan (2007) describe primary access as the ability of a researcher to get into the organizational system and be granted permission to undertake research. Secondary access, meaning access to documentation, data, people, and meetings, can be difficult to obtain, depending on the researcher’s role within the organization (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Being an insider-researcher within Jefferson High School, I was naturally granted primary access. However, as a classroom teacher and department head, it was difficult to obtain secondary access. In order to gather needed information for my study, I was directed to specific people at both the school and district level, who were not always open to assisting. When my title changed
to Assistant Administrator, my new position prompted the district to grant me secondary access. Brannick & Coghlan (2007) maintain that the higher the status of the researcher, the more access he/she has. My experience during this study supports their statement as my ability to access information and engage with personnel was more easily facilitated as an assistant administrator.

**Implications**

The implications for this action research case study are limited due to the study being conducted at a specific school, with a focus on a specific student population. However, data from this study could help schools determine whether or not a similarly structured transition program may be beneficial to their incoming ninth-grade students.

**Individuals**

Participating in an action research study affords AR team members the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge necessary to implement change. Rather than simply relying on their own in-classroom experiences to further their learning and understanding, team members use insight from others and data to guide their learning, decision-making, and pedagogical practices. By reflecting on what is being done in and out of the classroom, it can be easier to identify the problems that exist and develop a solution for those problems, leading directly to actions that change the environment.

**Local Schools**

This study has implications for understanding transition issues encountered by students who have been placed at-risk, not only at Jefferson, but at similar schools near Lake County School District. Administrators, counselors, and educators alike can use the data to reflect on the aspects of this transition program that could be offered at their school. Additionally, data can
help decision-makers identify which aspects of a transition program fit the needs of their students, while noting which components are not as good of a fit.

**District Leaders**

The results of this study indicate that implementing a cohort-style transition program may help ease the transition to high school for students who have been placed at-risk. Implications for this finding extend beyond the transition from middle- to high-school as transition can occur at many points in one’s life, whether expectedly or unexpectedly (Schlossberg, 1981). District-level leaders in districts other than Lake County can use the data from this study to inform decisions regarding the development and implementation of transition programming in each of their district’s respective schools. Through the incorporation of proper transition programming at all school levels, students could learn how to develop skills to cope with the stress and anxiety resulting from periods of transition. As a result of the development of those skills, students could learn how to identify problems they encounter through each transition and cultivate solutions from within.

**Knowledge Gained from the Action Research Case Study**

Based on the findings from this study, there are key themes and suggestions related to transition practices that contribute to the research. Action research teams are granted permission by organizational leaders to implement and evaluate interventions aimed at solving a problem within the organization. Leaders at Jefferson High School make decisions with the intent on doing what is best for students; so, as a result, the action research team was able to implement a program that resulted in positive change for a group of students who needed more support. However, the study also provided insight as to the shortcomings of the intervention. With this newfound knowledge, educators and leaders at Jefferson High School can continue to make an
impact for students who are in need, all while improving on the deficiencies identified through this study.

**Future Research**

While this action research study focused on the implementation of a transition program at one school, the findings from this study provide additional opportunities for research regarding transition for students who have been placed at-risk.

**Longitudinal Study**

While this study provided ample feedback and data regarding the short-term impact of a cohort-style transition program, the short time of the study hindered the team’s ability to fully analyze the long-lasting impact. As Schlossberg’s Transition Theory was used as the theoretical framework for this study, we were unable to determine if the program helped the students develop the necessary skills to transition through high school and into post-secondary options. Additionally, academic and attendance data analyzed for this study was limited to one semester. The team assumed that the observed improvement in academic achievement and absent events would continue, but there is no evidence to support that assumption.

Future research would benefit from being structured as a longitudinal study covering all four years of a cohort’s high school career. A longitudinal study would enable the research team to analyze the cohort’s transition to each grade level, while making necessary changes to the program without limitation. A long-term study spanning four years could facilitate a more in-depth evaluation of the transition program’s true effectiveness in supporting students who have been placed at-risk.
Replication of the Study with Student and Parent Feedback

Future research studies should use a similar structure to the one used for this study while incorporating a student and parent feedback component. Given the findings of this study were gathered from the teachers’ point of view, it is unclear as to how the program was perceived by the students, and parents of the students, who were enrolled into the program. Obtaining student and parent feedback could provide the research team with another level of insight into the program’s effectiveness and a better ability to identify the program’s weaknesses.

Furthermore, the additional insight could provide the research team the ability to better measure the similarities and differences in students’, parents’, teachers’ and leaders’ perceptions of the transition from middle- to high-school. Knowing and understanding how each group perceives the transition to high school could assist in creating a program that facilitates more a seamless transition to high school for each student.

Integration of Peer Support

Evidence from this study established that students who have been placed at-risk benefited from more in-depth academic support and personalized instruction. However, evidence also indicated that the mentoring aspect of the transition program was not a benefit to the students. Findings suggested that students would have received a greater benefit by interacting with older peers who could model appropriate behavior, share strategies for coping with the transition to high school, and provide additional academic support. As a result, future research might include examination as to how incorporating peer support interventions impacts the effectiveness of a cohort-style transition program for students who have been placed at-risk.
Summary

This action research case study employed two action research cycles. Cycle I ran from July 2017 through September 2017 and included diagnosing the problem, designing the intervention, identifying the students who qualified for the intervention, and implementing the transition program for the first nine weeks of the school year. Cycle II ran from October 2017 through January 2018 and included reviewing the findings from Cycle I, enacting changes that were able to be made, implementing the transition program for the final nine weeks of the fall semester, and analyzing data to generate the team’s findings. Findings indicate that (a) a cohort-style transition program might have a positive impact on the academic components of the learning environment but could lead to a higher frequency of non-academic issues, (b) a cohort-style transition program might have a positive impact on academic achievement and attendance for students who have been placed at-risk, and (c) participating in an action research team may allow team members the ability to identify and employ changes during implementation, resulting in a stronger intervention. Future research studies should consider (a) conducting a longitudinal study, (b) replicating this study while incorporating a student feedback component, and (c) integrating more peer support activities in lieu of the mentoring sessions and career-readiness activities.

Implementing a cohort-style transition program for students who have been placed at-risk allowed the action research team to adequately answer the research questions guiding this study while enacting organizational change. The results of this action research case study supported empirical literature on transition programming for students making the transition from middle- to high-school. Studies recommended that transition programs be designed with intent and a purpose, to create an environment that is supportive and meet the needs of the students.
participating in the program (Benner, 2011; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; DeSocio et al., 2007; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). As decision-makers at Jefferson High School begin to put processes in place for next school year, they will be able to refer to this case study to inform future planning. Regardless of the supports that are put in place, FLEX can be used as a foundational framework to ensure rising ninth-grade students are receiving the supports they need to make a seamless transition to high school.
References


Allensworth, E., & Easton, J. Q. (2007). What matters for staying on-track and graduating in
Chicago Public High Schools: A close look at course grades, failures and attendance in
the freshman year. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

America’s Promise Alliance. (2015). *Don’t quit on me: What young people who left school say


APPENDIX A

TEACHER INVITE LETTER

June 8, 2017

Teachers:

I am an Ed.D. graduate student under the direction of Professor Dr. Sheneka Williams in the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled *Cultivating a Successful Transition - Impact of a Cohort-Style Transition Program on Ninth-Grade Students Who Have Been Placed At-Risk*.

The purpose of this Action Research study is to use Schlossberg’s Transition Theory to inform the implementation of a Freshman cohort transition program for at-risk ninth grade students. The study’s research questions are as follows:

- To what extent does a cohort-style transition program impact the learning environment for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk?
- What trends in attendance, behavior and academic achievement are observed in ninth-grade students placed at-risk who participate in a cohort-style transition program?
- How does one's participation in an action research team affect the implementation of a transition program for ninth-grade students who are placed at-risk?

Your participation will involve being part of an Action Research Team that will meet twice a month for one hour. Additionally, you will be asked to participate in focus group sessions and complete a survey at the conclusion of the study. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. No individually identifiable information about you, or provided by you during the research, will be shared with others without written permission. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used. In fact, the published results will be presented in summary form only. Your identity will not be associated with your responses in any published format.

The findings from this project may provide information on the factors affecting student attendance, behavior, and academic achievement of our at-risk student population. In turn, these findings could help develop a transition program that utilizes best practices that respond to the specific needs of the at-risk student population.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact me at aba82942@uga.edu. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 612 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu.

Thank you in advance for your consideration and please keep this for your records.
Sincerely,

Aaron Archambeau
# APPENDIX B

## STUDENT RISK ASSESSMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Factors</th>
<th>Check (✓) if present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has not passed two or more CRCT tests during middle school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in Literacy/Math Plus during middle school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of Physical, psychological, sexual abuse, rape or other violent crime; student has experienced trauma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Language/cultural barriers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor attendance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Repeated Tardiness (to school)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeated Tardiness (to class)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Repeated behavioral infractions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Out-of-home placement (foster care, detention, residential treatment)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Living with family members other than parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Past or current incarceration of parent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Committed criminal acts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engages in self-injurious behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has experienced repeated school failure</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental health issues</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Recent crisis/life transition (death, divorce, illness of student or family member)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family dysfunction/child’s needs not being met</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Student moves frequently</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involved in the Forsyth County Court System</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Involved with DFCS</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher/staff referral</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX C

### EMPIRICAL FINDINGS TABLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s), Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Method(s)</th>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cohen, J.S. &amp; Smerdon, B.A. (2009)</td>
<td>Tightening the Dropout Tourniquet: Easing the Transition from Middle to High School</td>
<td>To analyze the effect transition to high school has on students’ academic progress and the developmental and contextual changes that occur in adolescents’ lives as they move from one school to another.</td>
<td>The researchers used a mixed-methods design using standardized testing data, classroom achievement scores, self-reflection questionnaire, and face-to-face interviews.</td>
<td>Transition is an event that begins at some point during middle school and extends throughout ninth grade and possibly beyond. Transition programs show promise in addressing transition problems, but little is being done to identify struggling students prior to their entrance into high school. Creating at-risk indicators would increase the chances of identifying struggling students earlier and providing more thorough transition services.</td>
<td>It appears middle school does not adequately prepare students for high school. Therefore, the structure of transition programs should be one that is proactive instead of being reactive. Identifying struggling students earlier could help bridge the gap between the level of preparedness students are leaving middle school with and the level of preparedness needed to be successful high school.</td>
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<td>Haselden, P.G., Sanders, M., &amp; Sturkie, L. (2012)</td>
<td>Action Research: Effects of Self-Efficacy Training on Low Achieving Students</td>
<td>To investigate the effects of self-efficacy training on low achieving high school freshman who were considered to be at risk for academic failure. Students participated in a psycho-educational group counseling session for forty-five minutes each week over a nine-week period. The research employed a mixed-methods design using a combination of pre- and post-test data from the Pier-Harris Total Self-Concept assessment and face-to-face interviews reflecting on the counseling sessions. Assessment data revealed significant differences between pretest and posttest scores. All six domains yielded positive results with the Happiness domain yielding the highest increase in mean score. Interview data cited consistency as being the primary benefit. Reflection provided an opportunity for participants to track their success and involvement within the group. All participants expressed a desire to continue with the counseling sessions. This study provides a great framework for schools to include in their transition programs. Sometimes the focus becomes too heavy on the academic struggles of students rather than students’ perceptions of themselves. Providing self-efficacy training can help students develop a more positive self-image, which can possibly lead to more academic success.</td>
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<td>Eccles, J.S. &amp; Roeser, R.W. (2011)</td>
<td>Schools as Developmental Contexts During Adolescence</td>
<td>To determine the role various aspects of educational institutions play in adolescents’ intellectual and social-emotional development. A qualitative multiple case study design. The researchers adopted a developmental systems conceptualization of school and focused on data regarding three levels of schools Students fare best in settings that fit well with their developmental, culture, and psychological needs. Researchers found that adolescents It is important for all involved in education to understand the impact social interaction has on a student. But, it is also important to understand that social</td>
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<td>McCallumore, K.M. &amp; Sparapani, E.F. (2010)</td>
<td>The Importance of the Ninth Grade on High School Graduation Rates and Student Success in High School</td>
<td>Mixed-Methods design using graduation data, student achievement data and face-to-face interviews.</td>
<td>To analyze how the transition to high school affects the academic and social development of adolescents and provide transition solutions which schools can implement that will help ease the transition to high school.</td>
<td>As graduation requirements have continued to become more rigorous, the need for proper transition programs has gained steam. Transition programs, such as freshman academies, have helped alleviate some of the transition issues facing students. However, the problem does not adhere to only the ninth grade. Transition programs should begin to focus on middle school as well as ninth grade. Students that fall behind in ninth grade have a greater risk of not graduating on-time or dropping out of school. Starting the transition program at the middle school level can help strengthen students’ level of preparedness for high school.</td>
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Transition programs that begin in middle school are more successful than those that start in ninth grade.

| McIntosh, K., Flannery, K.B., Sugai, G., Braun, D.H., & Cochrane, K.L. (2008) | Relationships Between Academics and Problem Behavior in the Transition from Middle School to High School | To track and evaluate academic and school discipline records for students receiving general and special education services as they transitioned from middle school to high school and to determine the significance and strength between academic skills and behavior variables. | Quantitative research design employing an analysis of variance and structural equation modeling. Researchers compared discipline data with student achievement data to see if a correlation exists between the two. | Results of this study showed significant links between problem behavior in middle school and academic performance in ninth grade. In addition, a strong link exists between academic skills in middle school and problem behavior in ninth grade. Researchers suggested implementing early interventions that address academic skills to curb bad behavior and prevent dropout. | While programs exist which help prevent poor behavior, programs are still waiting until the student exhibits a problem before doing anything about it. Transition programs should start to focus on student in middle school to provide early intervention. Once a student falls behind in high school, the opportunity for academic success decreased dramatically. By implementing a program aimed at middle school students and their behavioral tendencies, there is great opportunity for improving those behaviors and |
| Uvaas, T. & McKevitt, B.C. (2013) | Improving Transitions to High School: A Review of Current Research and Practice | To analyze the effect high school transition has on students and provide recommendations for high school transition programming based on the current research. | A qualitative multiple case study design. The researchers analyzed current research and case studies in the area of school transitions and had students complete a questionnaire about high school pre- and post-transition. Researchers provided recommendations for creating a proper transition program based on research and student responses. | The biggest concerns for students before and after entering high school were primarily academic and procedural. The greatest support students received as they made the transition was from their social interactions with their peers. Participants experienced a wide variety of stressors during their high school transition. Students who experienced multiple stressors at the same time were more likely to fall behind academically and have social anxiety. Researchers provided the following recommendations: Schools need to ensure they are providing some sort of transition program for their ninth-grade students. At the same time, schools need to conduct studies to determine the effectiveness of their program. The focus of the transition programs should continue to be about creating connections between students, teachers, and peers. One of the biggest indicators of student struggles is the lack of established, personal relationships in the school building. The researchers only solidified that thinking through the questionnaire students filled out during middle school and after their ninth-grade school year. | preventing academic failures at the high school level. |
1. Develop an Individualized Transition program and Curriculum
2. Promote Academic Development
3. Promote School Connectedness
4. Examine School Structure
5. Identify Students Experiencing Multiple Stressors

Smith, J.S., Feldwisch, R., & Abell, A. (2006) Similarities and Differences in Students’ and Parents’ Perceptions of the Transition from Middle School to High School

To examine students’ and parents’ perceptions of the transition from middle school to high school and present findings which can be used to help school districts evaluate the effectiveness of its transition materials and programming.

A qualitative research design using the Perceptions of Transition Survey completed by both parents and students. The survey focused on students’ and parents’ perceptions of the transition from middle to high school.

Responses on the survey proved the perceptions of high school transition varied greatly from student to parent. Specifically, students had a misconception about the amount of freedom one has in high school.

The responses from the students are fairly eye-opening as they show how a middle school student’s perception of high school is not always the reality. Results from this study only make a stronger case for implementing a transition program that begins at the middle school level and carries through ninth grade. Transition programs that begin earlier can help students and parents...
Parent responses showed a lot of worry about their child’s transition to high school. In almost every category, parents worried more than their children who were about to enter high school.

Students were most excited about choosing classes. Parents were most excited about their child getting good grades.

Students were most worried about getting too much homework. Parents were most worried about social peer pressure.

set the right expectations as to what high school will be like.

In addition, students can better prepare themselves for what is to come, which can lead to more academic success and positive interactions.
APPENDIX D

POST-IMPLEMENTATION SURVEY FOR STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Please read each statement and select the response that best describes your perception of the cohort-style transition program implemented this year. Your responses to this survey may be published, but your name will not be used.

Overall Structure of the Program

1. The cohort-style transition program creates an environment where students feel like a valued member of the school.

   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree

2. The cohort-style transition program creates an environment where students feel as if the staff cares about their success.

   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree

3. The cohort-style transition program creates an environment where learning is fun and encouraged.

   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree

4. The cohort-style transition program creates an environment where students and teachers treat each other with respect.

   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree

5. The cohort-style transition program creates an environment more conducive to students and teachers developing personal relationships.

   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree

Classroom Environment and Instruction

6. The cohort-style transition program allows teachers the ability to personalize instruction.

   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree
7. The cohort-style transition program allows teachers to more easily communicate expectations to students.

   Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

8. The cohort-style transition program creates a classroom environment where students are more engaged in instruction.

   Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

9. The cohort-style transition program creates a classroom environment where students receive an adequate level of support for their learning.

   Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

10. The cohort-style transition program creates a classroom environment where students feel comfortable asking questions.

    Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

11. The cohort-style transition program creates a classroom environment where students feel comfortable making mistakes.

    Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

12. The cohort-style transition program creates a classroom environment where individual student’s needs are more easily met by the teacher.

    Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

**Academic Achievement, Attendance, and Discipline**

13. Since the implementation of this transition program, student tardiness has improved.

    Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

14. Since the implementation of this transition program, student attendance has improved.

    Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree

15. Rules for student behavior are consistently enforced by each teacher participating in the transition program.

    Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree
16. Since the implementation of this transition program, student behavior does not interfere with instruction.

   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree

17. The cohort-style transition program has had a positive influence on student behavior.

   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree

18. The cohort-style transition program has helped at-risk students achieve a higher level of academic achievement than a traditional classroom setting.

   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree

Conclusion

19. I would recommend a cohort-style transition program for at-risk students to other schools.

   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree

20. I believe a cohort-style transition program for at-risk students helps ease the transition from middle school to high school.

   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Neutral  Agree  Strongly Agree

Open-Ended Questions

21. How did the cohort-style model help at-risk students’ transition to high school?

22. How did the cohort-style model hinder at-risk students’ transition to high school?

23. In what ways did the cohort-style model create a proper learning environment for students who have been placed at-risk?

24. In what ways could the general ninth-grade population benefit from a ninth-grade academy similar to the one implemented at this school?

25. In what ways can the cohort-style transition program be improved?
APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Protocol Focus Group Session #1

Introduction:
*This introductory text will be used for each Focus Group Session.*

My name is _______ and I will be the moderator for today’s focus group. The purpose of this focus group is to learn more about your knowledge of ninth grade academies or transition programs. All of you have been asked to participate because you are teachers who are participating in the transition program we are implementing for students who have been placed at-risk. It is our expectation that your opinions and experiences will help us learn more about the effectiveness of the cohort-style transition program.

Each focus group session will be recorded to ensure all comments are heard and considered for our final report. You can be assured that your identity will remain completely anonymous as we will not be including any names or identifying information in our reports. The reports will be reviewed by the Freshmen Learning Excellence (FLEX) team to adjust the program as they deem necessary. At the conclusion of each focus group session, the audio recording will be transcribed and analyzed. The information you share, as the participants, will be separated into themes and topics and distributed to the administrative team at Jefferson High School and the Student Support Services Department at Lake County Public School District. Both groups will use the information you provide to evaluate the effectiveness of the services they provide. Once again, your identity will not be revealed at any time during this process.
Before we begin, I would like to go over a few ground rules for the focus group. These are in place to ensure that all of you feel comfortable sharing your experiences and opinions.

**Ground Rules:**
*These ground rules will be used for each Focus Group Session.*

1. **Confidentiality** – Please respect the confidentiality of your peers. The information you provide will be distributed with no identifying information attached.
2. **One Speaker at a Time** – Only one person should speak at a time to ensure everyone is heard and their feedback is included.
3. **Use Respectful Language** – In order to facilitate an open discussion, please do not use any language that may be considered offensive to other members of the group.
4. **Open Discussion** – This is a time for everyone to express their opinions and viewpoints. There will be no right or wrong answers and consensus may not be reached.
5. **Participation is Important** – It is important that everyone’s voice is heard in order to make this the most productive focus group possible. Please speak up if you have something to add to the conversation.

**Questions for Focus Group Session #1:**

1. Why did you decide to participate in the transition program?
2. How do you define a transition program for ninth-grade students?
3. What does a transition program look like to you and what is its purpose?
4. Do you feel there is a need for a transition program at this school? Why or why not?
**Conclusion Text**  
*This concluding text will be used for each Focus Group Session.*

Thank you for participating in today’s group. As a reminder, I will be sharing the information learned during this session with the administrative team at Jefferson and the Student Support Services Department at Lake County Schools in order to help them evaluate their programs and services. If you think of any additional thoughts or comments that you would like to share, please contact me at ______.

**Protocol for Focus Group Session #2:**

The same introductory text, ground rules and conclusion text used during Focus Group Session #1 will be used for this focus group session.

**Questions for Focus Group Session #2:**

1. What aspects of the cohort-style transition program have you found to be most impactful?
2. What aspects of the cohort-style transition program have you found to be the most challenging?
3. In what ways has the cohort-style transition program provided your students an opportunity to develop skills in the areas where they were lacking? If it has not, how can the program be changed to ensure students are developing those skills?

**Protocol for Focus Group Session #3:**

The same introductory text, ground rules and conclusion text used during Focus Group Session #1 will be used for this focus group session.

**Questions for Focus Group Session #3:**

1. If you could make any changes to the transition program, what would they be? Why?
2. Do you feel differently about a transition program now as compared to the beginning of the school year? In what ways?
Protocol for Focus Group Session #4:

The same introductory text, ground rules and conclusion text used during Focus Group Session #1 will be used for this focus group session.

1. Would you recommend a transition program to surrounding schools? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. What is one thing you learned from participating in this transition program that you did not know before?