

**STUDY OF THE SUCCESSES, PITFALLS, AND OUTCOMES OF TRANSITION
PROGRAMS WORKING WITHIN THE CONSORTIUM FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION**

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Eric Della Lucia, Ed.D

Transition is a concern for children moving from the eighth grade into high school. Students experience difficulty with grades, behavior, and emotional transitions at that juncture in their education. The trend can be observed both across the nation and locally in western Pennsylvania. This paper gives evidence of the national issues that students experience with transition in the review of the literature. Beyond the review, the study focuses upon school districts in Western Pennsylvania that have entered into an organization called the Middle-High Initiative. These districts have done so with the purpose of creating transition programs because of an identified need in this area within their district. The Middle-High Initiative works toward the common purpose of improving middle to high school transition within member school districts. The study documented in this paper highlights varied information concerning member districts of the Middle High Initiative. Included are the demographics of member schools. In addition this paper includes the reasons why school districts became involved in the purpose of easing transition for their youngsters entering the high school, the set of challenges each school faces in transition, and the programs implemented by each district to help ease transition. Finally, the paper documents the ways that each district used their membership in the Middle-High Initiative to help devise and implement strategies to aid in student transition along with the successes and failures in the process.

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1.0 CHAPTER I: BACKGROUND

This study was organized around questions for members of transition program teams in Western Pennsylvania participating in the Consortium for Public Education. Transition programs are initiatives planned within a school district to help students as they move from building to building. In this paper the building move highlighted is that from middle school to high school. The Consortium for Public Education is part of the Public Education Network, but works specifically with school districts in Western Pennsylvania. Its mission statement is as follows, “The Consortium is a unique third-party convener, broker and catalyst dedicated to making a difference in the lives of all children and their communities”. The Consortium for Public Education started as the McKeesport Education Consortium in 1985 focusing on creating improvement in the McKeesport Area School district located in Allegheny County, along the Monongahela River. By 1987, the Consortium grew to service 20 southwestern Pennsylvania schools and thus changed its name to the Mon Valley Education Consortium as the newly serviced schools were located on or near the Monongahela River. In 2007, the scope of focus for the Consortium changed again and its geographical scope extended to schools throughout western Pennsylvania and thus has changed its name once again to the Consortium for Public Education. The Consortium now focuses on initiatives from five categories; these are leadership development for individuals and organizations, middle-high school transformation, early literacy, networking, and advocacy (Consortium for Public Education, 2010 ¶ 3).

The middle-high school transformation is the category pertinent to this study and the category within which the transition teams that I will study are working. “The Middle-High Initiative provides the teams with research and support for planning, implementation and evaluation. In addition it aims to help districts by bringing them together to share ideas and best practices” (Consortium for Public Education, 2010 ¶ 1)

I am involved on a middle-high transition team as a teacher at the Elizabeth Forward Middle School, a district approximately 15 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 2007, I was asked by my building principal to participate in Elizabeth Forward School District’s middle-high transition team dedicated to providing a smoother transition for our students from 8th grade to 9th grade. The need for Elizabeth Forward to join the Middle-High Initiative or Forum within the Consortium for Public Education arose from the difficulty students had been experiencing during transition from middle to high school. This need was identified by teachers in the high school in terms of a high number of discipline referrals and absenteeism, a drop in grade point average, and an over all belief that students are not as prepared as they should be for the rigors of ninth grade. These “red flags” will be a recurrent theme in this paper and are signs that students are having difficulty making the transition into their ninth grade year. Elizabeth Forward had a long-standing relationship with the Consortium and when the Consortium for Public Education decided to expand its focus to encompass the Middle-High Initiative, Elizabeth Forward took the opportunity to join. It is through meeting time and various resources provided by the Consortium for Public education that our team at Elizabeth Forward is able exist. As I became more involved with the middle-high initiative I decided to conduct a study of how other teams in the consortium have begun, evolved, and experienced success and failure. This paper will tell their story. The study connects research that proves a national trend in education finding

that transitions are difficult for students between school levels and especially between middle and high school. In this study, I will use a descriptive study approach to examine the development of transition programs in schools involved in the Consortium for Public Education network. Below is a chart that shows the Consortium for Public Education, its focus points and the Consortium’s relationship to the Middle- High Forum.

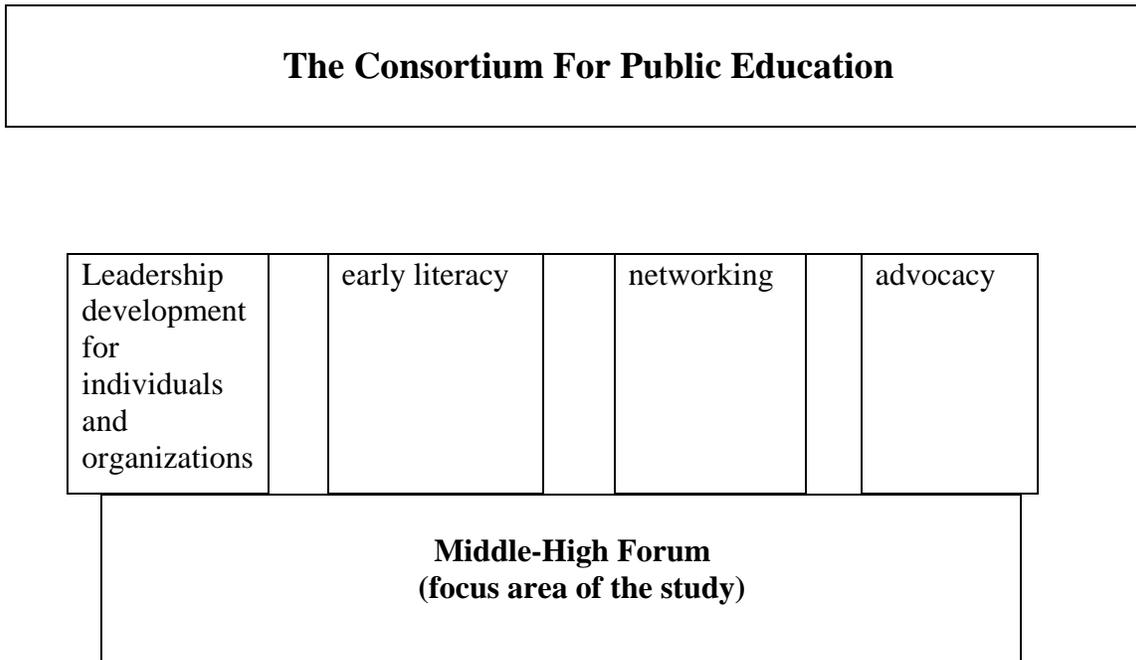


Figure 1. Relationship between the Consortium for public education and the Middle-High Forum

1.1 INTRODUCTION

-- “High School is great. But the first few weeks (or months) of freshman year can be daunting. You have new teachers to get in synch with, new confusing social dynamics to work out, and new jam-packed hallways to navigate. You’re also in the middle of a huge transition from adolescence to adulthood. It’s all kind of scary” (Macklin, 2008 p. 1)

More is expected from public education than ever. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has had a great deal to do with these increased expectations. “The central mandates in the law are aimed at holding schools accountable for the academic achievement of their students” (Klein & Walsh, 2008 p. 21). These expectations are raised at a time when societal factors seem to be conspiring against public education. Family life has changed over the past decades in that the structure of family has become less stable (Social Science Data Analysis Network, 2008). In response to the changing family, educational resources are drained as educators are now working

under an “expectation that schools perform more and more of the nurturing and custodial functions that heretofore have been the exclusive purview of home and family” (Lezotte, 1992 p. 3). In addition, children’s lifestyles have become increasingly fast paced in regards to the technology that is a part of their everyday lives.

Technology creates competition for the attention span of students. Willard Daggett, President of the International Center for Leadership in Education, in a presentation to the Elizabeth Forward School District staff stated that students are used to multitasking three activities at a time so that the delivery mode of most teachers is not stimulating enough to hold the attention of students for long (Willard Daggett, personal communication, September 16, 2007).

Technology’s effect on education has extended to home as well, as technology creates competition for time and interest in working on homework or projects. Such a phenomenon is problematic to the point that the issue was addressed by presidential candidate (at the time) Barack Obama as he stated in the October 15, 2008 presidential debate that parents need to put the video games away and shut the television off to help their kids complete their homework (CBS Television 10-15-08). Even more active students for whom the video games and television are not a problem may place homework low on the priority list as other activities take center stage in their evenings. As Xu states, the findings from his work concerning completion of homework only “serve to underscore the unattractiveness of homework in the presence of other competing after-school activities” (2006, p. 87). All of the above is happening while as Dr. Willard Daggett says, “[W]e’ve moved from an industrial-based economy to a technological information based economy” (O’Neil, 1995 p. 46). Consequently, education is becoming increasingly important as young adults who are more adept at working with their hands rather

than in a classroom can no longer take their manual labor to a local factory and earn an excellent living.

Schooling as it is established now is not prepared to deal with the changes described above that have occurred over the past several decades (O'Neil, 1995). In response to the current expectations of public education, we who are entrusted with the responsibility of educating children must look for ways to improve student achievement despite all of the societal factors educators face. I believe that educators, like the old adage says, need to work smarter rather than harder. The challenge is to find ways to best focus our resources to increase student achievement. One possible way to focus resources that has peaked my interest is the idea of creating a transition program for students as they enter their high school years. The opportunity to be involved in such a program has presented itself through working on a transition team for the Elizabeth Forward School District within the Consortium for Public Education. The Consortium is a local educational advocacy group that promotes school improvement through varied initiatives. In my work on our Elizabeth transition team I have gained a great interest in studying ways in which schools can improve the transition experience for students from middle to high school. This venture is important to me because of personally having had a difficult time making the transition. Additionally, I recall being a high school senior involved in a rudimentary transition day in the early nineties as a guest speaker to the up coming class. What is more, in researching the subject, I have gained a greater appreciation for the importance of those beginning efforts almost two decades ago. Some compelling evidence warranting the need for a focused transition program from eighth to ninth grade have surfaced. Moreover, through my research I have concluded that working on improving the ninth-grade year through transition

programs is not only a positive support for students, it is absolutely vital given the state of affairs in the pivotal year of ninth grade.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to ascertain what constitutes best practices for schools in order to make a more effective transition for school students between eighth and ninth grade. Factors are identified in this study as needing to be addressed by a transition team which, when addressed appropriately, will lead to a successful student transition. The evidence will be ascertained from the experience of several schools in Southwestern Pennsylvania that have set a transition program in place. The need for an effective transition program comes from students' great difficulty experienced when entering high school. "More students fail ninth grade than any other grade of school" (Cauley and Jovanovich, p15). What is more, the Carnegie Council stated "middle grade schools, junior high, intermediate, and middle schools—are potentially society's most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift" (1989, pp. 12-13). Not only does the literature identify transition as an area in which focus needs to be targeted, additionally, the schools participating in this study have found that transition into ninth grade is the most critical area of need for their school district. Best practices ¹ in addressing key factors of middle-high transition from each district's experience as they relate to creating transition programs will be reported out in this study as well as pitfalls experienced.

¹ The most efficient way of structuring and executing an initiative.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There are several key factors that need to be dealt with in order to make transition from middle to high school successful for students (Bushaw, 2007; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gerwitz, 2007; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Queen, 2002; Reents, 2002; Rice, 2001; Schiller, 1999). This researcher will examine the successes and pitfalls transition teams in nine Western Pennsylvania Schools working within the Middle-High Initiative of the Consortium for Public Education have encountered with these factors as they relate to easing transition. Through interviews of several transition teams working within the Middle-High Initiative, this researcher will ascertain what team members learned about how to address the key factors in easing transition from eighth to ninth grade. The documentation of the successes, pitfalls, and barriers that the transition teams being studied have already faced will be important to any school organization that may be undertaking the work of creating a transition program in their district in the future.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Why did districts in this study begin to develop transition teams.
2. At the inception of your transition teams, what did your team believe were the solutions to solving transition issues in your district?
3. As of the present time, has your original plan for easing transition changed? If so what are you doing differently compared to the original plan?
4. What resources from the Consortium for Public Education has your team been able to draw upon and what resources from the Consortium are you currently using?

1.5 DEFINITION OF TERMS

Best Practices – the most effective way of implementing educational strategies.

Consortium for Public Education – organization in Western Pennsylvania working to provide resources to member districts in an effort to improve student achievement.

Credit recovery – enabling students to remediate credits in parts of a course where they fell into an unsatisfactory category in an effort to promote student achievement.

Cyber-school – a type of schooling that focuses its curriculum towards on-line methods of teaching and learning.

Freshman Seminar – a course offered in the freshman year of high school that focuses upon skills necessary in achieving success in later years.

Middle-High Initiative – districts whose purpose is to improve transition for students moving from the middle school to the high school working under the parent Consortium for Public Education.

Ninth Grade Academy – a setting apart of ninth-graders within a group of classes and usually, but not always within a geographic location in the high school.

Teaming – a setting apart of middle school kids by class groupings and geographic location within the middle school.

1.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is limited to schools in western Pennsylvania and members of the Middle-High Initiative within the Consortium for Public Education.

The study is limited to those schools selected for this study.

The study is limited to the frame of reference, knowledge, experience, and worldview of the participants concerning transition programs.

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 FINDINGS CONCERNING TRANSITION

2.1.1 Number of transitions a predictor of success

“The purpose of the middle school remains today to serve as a transition for students as they develop from childhood into adolescence” (Queen, 2002, p.5). It should stand to reason that since middle school itself is a transition, students should be well prepared to enter high school after their middle school years. This, however, is not the case. Rather, students who attend a K-8 school achieve at a higher rate into their high school years than students from middle school. This, as Queen (2002 xiii) states is due to the fact that k-8 students make fewer transitions than middle school students. In fact, the more transitions made by students, the greater the achievement loss measured by grades and dropout rates. “Students who experience the stresses of numerous changes often have lower grades and decreased academic motivation, and they eventually drop out of school” (Cauley and Jovanovich, 2006, p15). Considering this research, it is curious to me why school districts would create a logistical scenario that would increase the number of transitions. For example, some schools are creating k-2 buildings, followed by grades 3-6, 7-8, and so on. Although students move within the same group of children, the fact remains that they are changing buildings. Each building has its own culture to which students must

adapt. That said, the k-8 model, although successful in creating only one transition, is difficult for larger school districts. A k-8 model also creates the largest school possible with given numbers, which is something to be avoided in a large school district, as it is more desirable to keep kids from feeling anonymous in a large setting. Nevertheless, the more frequent the transitions, the more difficult school becomes for children.

2.1.2 Difficulty in transitions from elementary to middle schools

“Making a transition to a new school causes anxiety in students and can challenge the coping skills of many adolescents, especially those at risk” (Cauley and Jovanovich, 2006, p15)”. The fact remains that students must progress through transitions. Transitions challenge students with growth through change, but they can be difficult. The difficulties in transition occur at multiple times in the lives of students. Alspaugh and Harting (1995) have established that achievement loss occurs when students transition from a self-contained classroom to the middle school organization where students rotate and move through a rotation of teachers. This achievement loss occurred when students transitioned at any level whether at Grade 5,6,7, or 8. At any of these levels, students are roughly between 10 and 14 years of age. The next section establishes the fact that students can face difficulties in transition as adults as well.

2.1.3 Difficulty in transitions from high school to college

Difficulties in transition occur at adult levels of education as well when students leave the high school setting for college. For example, “1 in 3 of today’s freshmen won’t have earned a bachelor’s degree from any four-year school 8.5 years from now” (Chute, 2008, p1). Students

are having difficulty succeeding in college. In 2008, “about two-thirds of the new students at Community College of Allegheny County require at least one ‘developmental’ class below college level” (Chute, 2008, p2). This is further proof that students are having difficulty transitioning from high school to college. In Georgia about one third of students who have earned Hope scholarships² lose their scholarships because they fall below a B average. The hope scholarship is awarded to students who earn an average of 3.0 or above in high school (Chute, 2008). Thus, students who do well in high school have difficulty in the freshman year of college too. Remedial classes have become a standard part of college course offerings. “[T]he academic shortcomings of college freshmen have led to widespread use of remedial courses on campuses nationwide” (Smydo, 2008, p1). When students proceed through a change in their environment, they encounter difficulties in transition proven through achievement loss, and/or repeating course work or dropping out.

2.1.4 Difficulty in transition between middle and high school

The fact remains that the key transition, as it relates to improving graduation rates and student achievement at the high school level is the transition between middle and high school. A strong focus on the transition to high school is of the utmost importance.

Unfortunately, in researching transitions and their effect on students it has become apparent that ninth-grade transition is the most difficult for students. In fact, “More students fail ninth grade than any other grade of school” (Cauley and Jovanovich, 2006, p15). Difficulty in the transition from eighth grade to ninth grade exists nationally and within Western Pennsylvania

² For Georgia residents who have demonstrated academic achievement. www.gacollege411.org

as well. “The ninth grade, in particular, represents a weak link in the chain of schooling where students sometimes begin to disengage from their schools and so place themselves in danger of dropping out” (Bushaw, 2007, p.190). Because of this fact “Organizations such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the National Middle School Association (NMSA), and the Carnegie Council of Adolescent Development have acknowledged the need for educators to develop and implement age-appropriate programs to assist students in bridging the gap between the two levels” (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, p. 94). Specifically the Carnegie Council (1989) stated “middle grade schools, junior high, intermediate, and middle schools—are potentially society’s most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift” (pp. 12-13). The timing of the intervention through a transition program is incredibly important. As J. Allen Queen found, the lower students’ grades fell in ninth grade, the more likely they were to drop out (2005). Such a phenomenon makes the business of supporting students in their ninth-grade year more important. “We’re noticing that ninth grade has become one of the real concerns,” said Dick Flanary of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. “The traditional high school looks at the ninth grade as the first opportunity to deal with kids” (O’Crowley, 2007, p17). If students are not given a better start to high school, it may be too late to help them rebound in subsequent years.

“[D]rop out rates have been increasing since the 1970s. This increase has led to renewed interest and concern over how to keep children in high school through graduation” (Smith, 1997, p 144). In the region of Western Pennsylvania the importance of timing of intervention has been duly noted. In the city of Pittsburgh, “experience has shown...that if students are going to leave school, they are most likely to do it between the 8th and 9th grades” (Gerwitz, 2007, p1). Such evidence gives more reason to focus resources at this transition time. In the same article Mark

Roosevelt, superintendent of Pittsburgh schools at the time of publication said, “Eighth to ninth grade is a pivotal point. That’s where we have our highest dropout, repeat, and opt-out rate [of transfer to charter and private schools]” (Gerwitz, 2007, p.1). There is even more literature that speaks to the need for a transition program between the middle and high school. Bottoms stated in a 2006 article that:

More students fail ninth grade than any other grade of school.

Among fourteen- and fifteen-year olds who struggle with basic reading and mathematic skills, 20 percent drop out of school within two years.

A study of fifty-six Georgia and Florida high schools found that schools with extensive transition programs had significantly lower failure and dropout rates than those schools that did not offer comprehensive programs (Bottoms 2002 as cited in Cauley and Jovanavich p15)

Thus having some type of program in place to help students in their most trying time in their public school experience is crucial. What is more, timing the transition effort in the eighth grade year of middle school and carrying it through the ninth or preferably tenth grade years of high school is key to the success of today’s students.

Nationally, there are sobering facts about the state of our high school students as the facts relate to ninth graders. “Each year, almost one third of all public high school students...fail to graduate from public high school with their class. Many of these students abandon school with less than two years to complete their high school education” (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Morison, 2006, p 4). It is of paramount importance to find out significant reasons for these occurrences. High school provides opportunity for growth, but also a great deal of opportunity for failure that eventually can lead to dropping out. “The freshman year in high school is a period of new experiences and opportunities that often bring about rapid changes in students. Some students encounter difficulties during the transition from which they never recover” (Schiller, 1999,

p217). Additionally, “[r]esearch shows 9th graders have the largest failure rate and are at risk of dropping out when academic success is not experienced” (Reents, 2002, p. 15). The reality for students who are unprepared for high school is sobering. In fact, Bushaw (2007) states “While high school dropout data are hotly contested, the estimates range from about 17% to about 25%, depending upon the definition of a dropout and the data set used for analysis” (p191). Researchers and practitioners are pointing to ninth grade as the time to reach the students before they come to such a pass as dropping out. Students who fall behind in the transition between ninth and tenth grade are less likely to catch up and more likely to drop out (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). “In fact, researchers have identified 9th grade as the most critical point to intervene and prevent students from losing motivation” (Reents, 2002, p.16). Even schools that have proven to be successful as measured by state testing have had problems with their students moving out of the middle school and into ninth grade. Buckingham, a high performing school included in a study by Richard F. Elmore exhibited such a scenario. “The problem at Buckingham was that students leaving the school and moving into the high school were having difficulty meeting the high school’s expectations for reading, understanding, and interpreting high-level content. Such a problem did not show up in the state assessment, but it did show up in the assessments given by the high school teachers” (Elmore, 2003, p. 11). This scenario lends more proof that resources need to be focused on the ninth-grade transition year.

2.1.5 New challenges for ninth-graders

As students make the transition from eighth to ninth grade or middle to high school they face a variety of new challenges that create a lack of continuity between the middle and high school.

According to the Eugene 4J School District ³(personal communication, June 12, 2008), these challenges include facing increased graduation requirements, increased academic rigor, decreased personalization between students and teachers, changes in social status, learning a new culture, a larger school with more students, changing social and interpersonal expectations, increased expectations for making individual decisions, along with unfamiliar teachers, staff and administrators. A need exists for something to be done concerning transition from middle to high school in order to help students better acclimate themselves to high school in the early stages. Such action is vital early on in the students' experience so that the rest of their high school years are more positive. If action is not taken we run the risk of letting students get behind and struggling during the next four years. Therefore it is important to identify what creates some of the difficulty for our students. The difficulties cited above come from change or lack of continuity to which students may be having trouble adapting. In the transition from middle to high school the lack of continuity that exists can be broken into three main categories: "(a) discontinuity in school climate, (b) discontinuity in educational practices (c) discontinuity in social structures" (Rice, 2001, p 374).

2.1.6 Discontinuity in school climate

Decreased personalization between students and teachers can increase the difficulty in the transition from middle to high school for many students. Queen (2005) found that ninth-grade students perceive that high school teachers are not as helpful as those in middle school. Such a statement is evidence of a disruption in school climate as students leave the middle school with

³ District in Eugene, Oregon presenting at University of Pittsburgh Principals Academy seminar

its countless support systems. High schools are typically places where more control is placed upon students in terms of rules by both the individual teachers and administrators and where teachers are more impersonal with their students as compared to lower grade levels. As Rice states (2001), “high schools service students fairly efficiently in the sense of economies of scale, but do so in part by decreasing personalization and therefore creating a sense of isolation in some students which may lead to a feeling floundering” (p. 390). Students may want to do well, but may feel as though they do not know how to do so. Rather, they may feel that they are alone in their educational journey and lack the guidance to show them how to succeed. The lack of one on one attention from a teacher sometimes adds to this feeling of isolation. Students experience a greater diversity of teachers in high school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000), and this for some students adds to the difficulty in assimilating to their new environment. Bushaw (2007) describes the atmosphere in high school as “sort and select” where students are being placed in the “college” or “other” category. Such a teaching arrangement may lead to a student feeling disconnected from school and this feeling may become difficult to change if left unchecked.

Heck and Mahoe state, “students are more likely to drop out of schools with rigid tracking, unchallenging curricula, poor teaching, and punitive behavior policies” (2006, p. 421). Unchallenging curricula, poor teaching, and punitive behavior policies as noted above can happen at any level of schooling. However, rigid tracking as opposed to heterogeneous grouping generally marks a difference between the middle school concept and the high school norm. This is significant because the change occurs at the ninth-grade high school level where students are having their greatest amount of difficulty.

As students make the transition from middle to high school they face a marked change in culture. The students with whom they attend school are now older and act differently than

middle school students. Also, a culture change exists because of the nature of changing buildings with a new set of students and school employees, and a new configuration of classes within the building. Getting to know this new culture becomes yet another stress to the adolescent during the middle to high transition. Students face a significant cultural change when leaving a middle school for a high school in large part because they are leaving the teaming configuration. Middle schools are set up as schools within schools called teams where a grade of students having 250 kids may be cut into two teams with 125 students each. Such an arrangement gives students greater opportunity to get to know adults who are their team teachers and students may benefit from the bond formed. When students make the move to high school this arrangement is discontinued and students flutter about more from teacher to teacher thus lacking the opportunity to form the same types of relationships they had in the middle school.

The same is true for relationships between students. In a team setting, students are together in one team group through the school year. This set up gives students time to get to know one another. When students leave that team the close relationships made in the middle school may suffer as they are scheduled in classes according to ability and preference rather than by a team identity. Students who have not developed the social skill set to deal with the cultural change may find the transition difficult.

Students have to deal with a larger campus or building when moving to the high school as well. Middle schools will have two or three grades housed within them while high schools will likely have four grades and thus the nature of the move entails entering a larger building. The case also may be that two or more middle schools or k - 8 schools may be moving into one large high school which could magnify the difficulty in the situation. Students who need one on one attention may feel more isolated in such a move. Students who are having difficulty in learning

may see problems increase while students who have a history of behavior problems, held in check in the smaller school setting, may see these behaviors increase significantly as well. Queen (2005) found that larger schools have a more negative impact on freshman. Thus, the difficulties that students may have in the move from middle school as related to size multiply when entering the larger high school.

When students move from middle to high school, they experience an increase in the expectations for making their own decisions. Some students are quite ready for such a task because of their own maturity or because they have positive and close parental involvement. On the other hand, students who lack these advantages are often not ready for the task. Nevertheless, teachers and administrators have expectations that students can make their own decisions. Those that can not may encounter great difficulty in choosing positive peers, following good daily study habits, and also may have problems choosing the courses that are challenging enough. Rice (2001) found that “an increase in the level of autonomy granted to students and their parents to choose courses had a negative effect on student performance” (p. 1). Perhaps students and parents are not ready to make such decisions at this juncture in the schooling process on their own. Furthermore, there may not be adequate help from school guidance to help parents and students make difficult decisions. Rice (2001) supports this argument in surmising that the quality of guidance may have something to do with these findings giving validity to the argument that improvements can be made in this arena. Yet, under the current circumstances, it is clear that students have greater difficulty when given more autonomy starting in the transition to ninth grade.

“Two school climate variables – increases in concerns about school safety and academic environment -- were found to magnify the negative effects of transition on student performance

in mathematics and science” (Rice, 2001, p. 390). The safety topic will be addressed in this section while academics will be dealt with in the next section.

Queen (2002) lists being “afraid they will be picked on, teased, or victimized by other students” and having to be “concerned about being safe in the new school” as two major concerns of students as they make the middle- high transition (p.21). “[T]he almighty seniors were once fresh meat as well. They, too, walked the halls in fear and hid their lunch money when the older kids passed by. Now that they are older, the upperclassmen try to make you feel inferior” (Macklin, 2008, p.24). This is a quote from a teenager from a San Francisco school that sums up the hazing type of behavior that ninth graders or “fresh meat”, (as student Carolyn refers to them in this excerpt), face as they enter the high school. Bullying was one of the “Areas of Concern” listed by Jay Hertzog as well (personal communication, Dec 2, 2008). Thus the fear of being picked on is real and it has been around for decades. Some students know how to negotiate their way around these undesirable social norms, yet many students do not.

Feeling safe at school is a high priority for students. If the safety needs of students are not met, one can assume that students will be more challenged at making the most of their ninth-grade year. It is worth noting that according to Queen (2002), parents echoed the same concerns for their children as students voiced for themselves. Addressing the safety issue can be an asset for gaining parental support and confidence from the community.

As stated above, getting teased by older students is a major concern for students entering the high school. “School violence in the form of gang violence and bullying is pervasive in American schools and detracts from the curriculum” (Queen, 2002, p80). Gangs are meeting the emotional needs of the students at times better than the families and schools. Gangs are giving students a sense of belonging and of self-worth. These are significant needs for students to have

met. School violence begets violence as students join gangs for protection from bullying or more serious gang violence. Students who are being bullied tune out of the curriculum and in some cases become violent towards other students. Therefore the students that we lose in transition in some cases become the next generation of gang members or bullies that make our schools more violent and increasingly difficult to manage.

Queen says, “[M]ale victims are more likely to withdraw from school activities and develop attendance problems” (2002, p81). Once students withdraw it can be quite difficult to develop a positive mind set towards their school. Queen (2002, p 81) also states that bullies are more likely to become “underachievers, dropouts, to perform below grade level, and to become abusive spouses and parents”. Thus there are societal effects to bullying as well. School violence propagates highly undesirable societal behavior and alienates students from schools. This creates an atmosphere where students are more likely to disengage from school and drop out. My research has surfaced other crucial components that create a need for a transition program between the middle school and high school. These components are discussed in the next sections.

2.1.7 Discontinuity in education practices

Departmentalized curriculums and whole class instruction can lead to a feeling of isolation and competition by students which in turn can lead to students becoming more passive, and schools becoming less responsive to student needs (Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993). The move of students from middle to high school involves a disrupting of relationships with other students and teachers at a time when students are struggling to develop their own independence from their parents (Dornbush and Ritter 1988). As a result, they can find themselves feeling alone.

Students change from being the seniors of the eighth grade to the freshmen of middle school. Such a move can leave even the most confident individuals in fear.

Hertzog lists graduation requirements as an “Area of Concern” by students making the transition from eighth to ninth grade (personal communication, Dec 2, 2008). Increased graduation requirements are coming to the forefront in public education and are another element that students making the middle-high transition must face. Several states are moving to increase graduation requirements for their high school population. Oregon and Mississippi have already done so and Pennsylvania is discussing the possibility of following suit (PDE, 2008). As we raise requirements, we raise the stress level of students. But it is interesting to note Rice’s (2001) findings that students, when entering the ninth grade, progress at a higher level from a relaxing of pressure by faculty as compared to their progress when being pressured. Although students benefit from a more relaxed environment, increased requirements will tend to cause teachers to be stressed and thus create a stressful environment within their classroom. Policy makers need to be cognizant of the fact that ninth-grade students are facing these increased requirements at a time when research points to lower stress from teachers having the effect of benefiting students. A transition program could help in the easing of pressure on students by offering comfort and familiarity. Moreover, because the requirements are increasing at this crucial time, it becomes evermore essential to give students a better start so they can face the increasing high school requirements head-on.

Next, as students move to the high school they face the challenge of increased academic rigor. “Often, expectations of the students are higher and maintaining former performance levels increases in difficulty...these factors are consistent with findings that the grades of students fall when transitioning to ninth grade” (Queen, 2002, p. 10). The move to the high school level from

middle school naturally entails increasing academic rigor. High school is a time when students are moved into a sense that “this counts now”. Students often have difficulty meeting this new pressure. Mizelle and Irvin report in a transition study conducted, that elements of high school were different than what kids expected. Specifically when referring to high school, students reported “school seemed a lot more difficult and demanding than it had in middle school” (2000, p58). With the NCLB legislation bringing increased accountability, the stakes are raised ever higher. “For some students, an increase in competition may serve as an impetus to perform at optimal levels ---- peer pressure to do better. For others, however, this type of change may threaten their confidence and undermine motivation, resulting in a decrease of effort and lower academic performance” (Rice, 2001, p. 376). Many students are having a difficult time in meeting the challenge of increased rigor when they reach the ninth grade. Transitioning smoothly from middle to high school becomes increasingly important.

2.1.8 Discontinuities in social structure

Changes in social status occur as students move from middle to high school. “The transition to high school has been found to bring about increased stress levels, decreased self-esteem, deteriorated academic performance, and heightened risk for maladjustment” (Alvarez & Weinstein as cited in Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, ¶ 4). Thus, the adjustment to new social structures can be very difficult. “While some students are successful in using this opportunity to redefine themselves socially and academically, the competitive and impersonal environment of the high school devastates others” (Queen, 2002, p2). Kids making the transition often find themselves going from the top of the heap in 8th grade to part of the herd in ninth grade. The causes of the toppling of social status can occur for myriad reasons. A superior athlete in middle

school may see his or her social position change as he or she is passed over by others who have hit their growth spurt. Likewise physical appearance may become more pleasing for some during the middle-high transition. This change may make them more desirable to the opposite gender and therefore increase their popularity. Such a change can be good or bad depending upon the way the child handles it. Ninth-grade students who may look older and more mature may find themselves as socially appealing to older students. Thus they may find themselves in situations with an older crowd that they are not ready to handle. Additionally, tracking may create a new and more positive peer group for some in which they may excel, while having the opposite effect for others who fall into less constructive peer groups. Regardless of the causes, changes in social status occur which create a disruption in the lives of students at the critical age when they are making their middle to high school transition.

Finally, students making the transition from middle to high school must deal with unfamiliar teachers, staff, and administrators who likely have increased expectations for student behavior and achievement. Thus, at an age full of uncertainty, students must deal with yet more uncertainty just as they became acquainted with teachers, staff, and administrators at the middle school. A feeling out period exists between the afore mentioned district employees and students. This period may create anxiety on the part of the student that may lead to a more difficult transition. In addition to the above lack of continuity that students face, other key factors have been identified that should be considered in dealing with students making the middle high transition. These factors are listed in the next paragraphs.

2.1.9 Importance of student self-perception

Hertzog and Morgan's work concerning changing self-perception between the eighth and ninth-grade year is eye opening. In a presentation given to the Consortium for Public Education (personal communication, Dec 2, 2008), Hertzog showcased data that stated children's perception of themselves during the eighth to ninth transition in terms of physical appearance, job competence, romantic appeal, behavioral conduct, and global self-worth were all negative. This data further demonstrates a need to help youngsters at a most difficult time.

2.1.10 Importance of identity

A further review of the literature states that adolescents need to feel that they have an identity within the school as they are coping with physical and emotional growth. This need occurs while school continues to get more difficult. Therefore it is important for students to feel confidence and self-worth in finding their identity. Queen (2002) states, "The most important task of the adolescent is the search for identity. The search occurs in three primary ways: by developing values, by developing pride in one's achievements, and by developing close relationships with peers" (p7). In my own experience as a ninth grader, I found a large part of my high school identity in being on the basketball team. Therefore I will use this experience to illustrate Queen's primary ways to find an identity in high school. My values were developed with my peers and coaches. These were positive people who promoted positive values. The achievement piece mentioned above is fulfilled in making the team and achieving on the court. The relationships are solidified by spending time with teammates, being tested together in competition, and having a common goal of winning.

“[Joining a team is about more than scoring goals or sinking baskets. It helps you build confidence and make new friends, and it offers camaraderie that’s hard to find” (Macklin, 2008, p. 90)].

Such confidence and camaraderie can help students gain a self-esteem that is key to success in their middle-high transition. The focus of values, pride, and close relationships can certainly be fostered in other ways. A variety of extra-curricular activities or anything else that connects the student with school is important in giving students identity within their school and amongst their peers. John Vater, a principal at Peabody High in Pittsburgh, when referring to incoming ninth graders is quoted as saying, “What happens when they don’t deal well with being uncomfortable is that they disengage, and that is a pattern that leads to bad grades (Gerwitz 2007 p2). Feeling as though students are part of the school is of utmost importance because it helps to fight the disengagement of students from school. Dufour et al (2004) stated, “[S]tudents who become involved in school activities experience higher academic achievement than those who do not” (p58). When students are involved and connected to school, they are more likely to engage in positive behavior when it comes to approaching their education. Chapman raises an excellent point when discussing the middle-high transition. He refers to the difference between the middle school and high school in terms of sustainability of programs that work to help students build relationships with teachers and fellow students. Chapman states, “Programs that seek to strengthen these elements during a student’s middle school years may be undermined by the student’s graduation to high school” (2001 p 2). These are powerful words that describe the change that students face in staying attached to school as they move to the upper grades, namely

from middle to high school. In an extreme case where students do not build a symbiotic relationship in their schools, quite the opposite may occur with detrimental results. The infamous Columbine case is perhaps the most recognizable example of this phenomenon. The perpetrators felt such a disconnection with the school that they waged war on it and its students. I hesitate to mention such extreme behavior, but it underscores the importance in students having an identity in the school.

2.1.11 Questions about transition

Hertzog and Morgan (1999) give five categories of concern that students have about the transition from middle to high school. These categories include curriculum, facilities, safety and discipline, teachers, counselors, and administrators, and general. Curriculum and staff have been discussed earlier in this paper, but are included in the five categories because they highlight the importance of both to kids making the transition. However, the five categories include two more vital concerns that were not discussed and are key components to recognize when studying transition. These concerns are discussed in the next two sections.

2.1.12 Questions about facilities

Questions about facilities stem from worries of getting lost, finding rest rooms, or other mundane, but necessary locations that could create worry in students who are unsure. High school students polled by Hertzog and Morgan (1999) mention the uncertainty about facilities as one of their biggest concerns. It may be easy for teachers and administrators to take the layout of

their building for granted, but it is important to note that the students do not. Rather, students are very concerned about familiarity with the layout of their building.

As mentioned above, there are also general questions that arise as well. Such questions may concern the food in the schools, the bus a student will ride, the attendance policy and so forth (Hertzog and Morgan 1999). Again, while these issues may seem like non-issues to adults, they may create stress in a child who is transitioning to the high school from the middle school.

2.1.13 Need for personalized attention.

Evidence is building which states that students need more one on one attention in the ninth-grade year. Students need more personalized attention to help them through the difficult transition from eighth to ninth grade. As Hardy states(2006), the nurturing environment that they are coming from in the elementary and middle schools change to a competitive environment in high school. Students entering this competitive environment need a much more personal touch. “In New York City, high schools are being downsized in order to create safer, less impersonal learning environments” (Duke, 1999, p. 1). For students, being known by their teachers is paramount. “Research on smaller learning communities (SLC) strongly suggests a correlation exists between student achievement and a personal connection to school” (Blanchard & Harms, 2006, p. 3). In Pittsburgh Public Schools, administration has gone as far as creating what they call a “ninth grade nation”. This “ninth grade nation” is a cohort of students that moves through school and finishes high school together. The hope as Gewert (2007) notes is to create an environment where kids feel cared about and connected to each other while having an adult they can count on and trust. The adult piece refers to a mentor program where every ninth-grade student is assigned an adult mentor who helps the student through academic as well as life issues.

Dufour et al (2004) cite a case study in suburban Chicago where students used a multi-tiered approach to personalized attention as a core piece to their Blue Ribbon achieving school improvement program. Their contention was that too many kids were falling through the cracks and personalized attention was needed to combat this problem. Carol Chmenelynski (2004) states the need for ninth graders to have special attention. The need arises as she says because, “They (students) often get overwhelmed by all of the changes in a large, anonymous—sometimes alienating—high school” (Chmenelynski, 2004, p.49). Students need to feel that they are an individual who is cared about within the school rather than a small part of an anonymous machine. Darling-Hammond, Aness and Ort (2002) found structures that allow for personalization and strong relationships in schools are a key factor in influencing a school’s success. They talk about not “falling through the cracks” and the “family feeling” observed in case study schools as paramount in importance. Darling-Hammond, Aness and Ort (2002) also cited in the same article that being pushed on a personal level and believed in by teachers was integral to student success. All of the research cited points to the common theme of personal attention for students. Issues mentioned earlier in this review would in large part be addressed by creating a school environment with personalized attention. Issues such as dealing with a larger campus, less personalized relationships between student and teacher, helping students find an identity, and school safety would be less problematic as a result of creating a more personalized setting in a school.

2.2 NOTABLE TRANSITION PROGRAMS – CITY OF PITTSBURGH

According to Gewertz (2007), the city of Pittsburgh Public Schools system has taken an aggressive approach to transitioning. They dedicate a full week in August to the program. Students engage in activities such as touring school facilities and learning school rules. In addition, students participated in fun activities like a scavenger hunt and hip-hop aerobics. Students discussed a summer novel and why good grades are important. Finally, students participated in an aerial ropes course at a wooded campsite. The students engage in such activities in order to create a special bond as a “9th Grade Nation” that will be a cohort that moves through school and finishes together. The hope is to create an environment where kids feel cared about and connected to each other while having an adult they can count on and trust. In order to create the above environment, the Pittsburgh Public Schools are committed to an improved discipline approach, offering extra academic help to struggling students, providing a mentor, and assigning truancy officers to those students who are a high absentee problem. In addition students in the cohort will participate together in a civic project.

Several breakout sessions occur where teachers give talks concerning particular issues that students may deal with. Through the activities mentioned above students become comfortable with one another and with teachers who they may see racing through the obstacle course or dancing during the aerobics lesson. Engaging in such activities helps the students trust each other and their teachers.

2.3 CREATING CARING COMMUNITIES

Student behaviors during transition tend to decline for various reasons, which may include an increase in population size, changes in grading, more teachers with more variety in procedures, and stricter school policies (Fuligni, Eccles, Barber, & Clemens, 2001). A focus on a caring climate can counteract some of the reasons for the decline in student behaviors. Holcomb (2007) states that interdependence between students can help to create an environment where students can combat some of the pressures of transition. A community feel must be established to create special attention for transitioning students. “Students are more likely to drop out of schools with rigid tracking, unchallenging curricula, poor teaching, and punitive behavior policies” (Heck & Mahoe, 2006, p. 421). When students feel that their teachers and schools are uncaring and inhospitable, the attachment is easily broken. In addition, educators need to beware of clustering students into dead end academic tracks by socioeconomic status. Such action traps children into a social group that may make them less likely to persist. Educators must meet educational needs for transition, which involves “providing a strong curriculum, improving school instruction, reducing course-taking inequities, and enhancing academic growth” (Heck & Mahoe, p. 421, 2006). In addition, it could be helpful to monitor children who move from another district using a database including their background information, which would be kept from state to state. Such a system is in place already in the Pittsburgh Public schools and can additionally be useful for teachers who are teaching new students to know more about their students.

In reading about and researching various transition programs that have been successful, I have observed some common features. Helping students achieve at a higher level and avoiding dropping out are the main goals to most transition programs targeted in the year students travel

from eighth grade to high school. Academies ⁴ and mentor programs that are student to student or teacher to student are common. Orientation consisting of building tours and parent discussions similar to college orientations are oft employed as well. Activities that stress the importance of being involved in extracurricular sports or organizations are stressed in hopes of making connections between the child and the school. Students who join in extracurricular activities develop pride in the school and self-esteem. This development results in the youngsters caring more about academic achievement. The above reasons make the ninth-grade year so pivotal as this year sets a tone for the high school experience. Is the student going to start in front of the eight ball or behind? Having a good start creates a greater likelihood that students will want to achieve continued success.

2.4 CONCLUSION

Jay Hertzog quoted in an article by Lawrence Hardy (2006) states that, “In an environment that was originally designed to sort kids rather than see them achieve, ninth graders are often the ones who feel most left out” (Hardy, 2006, p.21). The lack of focus on ninth graders is changing in recent years because of a belief that successful endeavors in this area lead to benefits through increased student achievement and student attrition. What is needed for our students moving to the high school is a decrease in disruptions. “Disruption causes distraction that can undermine academic progress” (Rice, 2001, p. 389). Every transition in a student’s academic career is a distraction. Some disruptions are derived from socioeconomic factors and other disruptions are

⁴ A cohort of ninth graders with the goal of guiding and nurturing through the ninth grade year.

institutional. Students on the move from middle to high school are undergoing an institutional disruption imposed by school systems. The thrust of the new focus on ninth graders has been easing this institutional disruption brought on by transition from eighth to ninth grade. Transition is defined as “a point at which students move from one segment of the education process to another” (Rice, 2001, p372). Making this transition a positive one can create positive effects on increasing student achievement and attrition rates. What is needed is a change in educational policy. “To the degree that problematic discontinuities can be identified, educational policy can be designed to ease this transition for students and improve one aspect of productivity in the longitudinal educational process” (Rice, 2001, p 273). Thus educators and policy makers have the power to improve student achievement by creating a smoother transition process from the middle to high schools. Educators need to create policy that helps ease the transition that students undergo. Smith (1997) found that “students who had access to a full and a partial transition program show a higher average GPA when compared with students who did not have such a program in their middle school” (p.6). Such a finding helps educators understand in clear terms that transition programs help improve student achievement.

Jay Hertzog, Dean of Education at Slippery Rock University, is quoted in an article by Chmelynski (2004) as saying; “Data is out there that shows if we get kids to the tenth grade, they will probably graduate from high school. Ninth grade is the critical year” (p50). The literature clearly reiterates that the ninth grade is the critical year. Students need the attention of educators in the form of transition programs at this critical juncture.

2.5 SUMMARY

It is evident from the research introduced that creating strong transition from middle to high school can have positive effects on student achievement in high school and beyond. Specifically, a major thrust of the research shows that transition programs are necessary in school districts to address various issues concerning transition. Such issues include having fewer transitions that create greater success, the intense need for focused transition programs between the middle and high school that have the effect of creating seamless transition, the need to create continuity between middle school and high school, and the importance of students finding an identity within their schools as well as receiving more personalized attention. The evidence for the need to create effective transition programs exists from a national standpoint, but there is a lack of research in terms of how transition is applied to schools in my locale of Western Pennsylvania.

3.0 CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

3.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There are several key factors that make transition from middle to high school notably difficult for students. The success of students depends on addressing the key factors creating difficulty. This researcher will examine how transition teams in nine Western Pennsylvania Schools have identified and addressed key factors that ease transition for students from eighth to ninth grade. Through interviews of several transition teams working within the Middle-High Forum of the Consortium for Public Education this researcher will ascertain what team members learned in their efforts to create an effective transition program while operating within the framework of the Consortium.

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Why did districts in this study begin to develop transition teams?
2. What did you think were the solutions to solving transition issues in your district?
3. Have your solutions to the problems changed, if so what are you doing differently compared to the original plan?
4. What resources from the Consortium for Public Education have you been able to draw upon and are currently using?

3.3 METHODOLOGY

This research project employs the qualitative research paradigm. The theoretical perspective used is social constructivism. In ascribing to the theoretical perspective of social constructivism one would ascribe to the belief that “reality is constructed by our own activity” (Kukla 2000). That is to say that we as social creatures have a prominent role in creating the social world around us. Noted social constructive theorist Andre Kukla expands on this assertion by saying, “we collectively invent the world rather than discover it” (2000). Social constructivism holds two tenets. The first being that the ‘human social world differs fundamentally from the natural world and should be studied differently. The second being that social constructivism “is the basis for most qualitative research, particularly that which focuses on group settings, cultures,

and sub-cultures” (Otto and Gunzenhauser, 2003). Therefore constructivism is a theoretical perspective within the qualitative research paradigm and is used to study social sciences. In addition there are two major pieces of epistemology⁵ to consider in the social constructivist paradigm. The first is that “knowledge is a product of culture” and “knowledge and meaning are collectively generated and transmitted by society” (Otto and Gunzenhauser, 2003). The meaning in terms of groups working to create a transition team will be constructed uniquely in each group. In addition, the ontology or nature of being states that “reality is constructed through various social processes” and that “individuals have one reality that seems most real” (Otto and Gunzenhauser, 2003). Each transition team will have their own socially constructed reality in their experience together. This reality will be based on their own “world view”. These beliefs will give each group a unique perspective on their experiences and results during the process of creating a transition program for their respective school.

3.4 PROCEDURES OF THE STUDY

The Consortium for Public Education is a parent group of the Middle-High Initiative also referred to as the Middle-High Forum. This initiative began out of a perceived need to ease the transition of students entering their ninth grade year. The need for easing transition was perceived by teachers working within a teachers’ academy⁶. This academy was also operated out of the Consortium for Public Education. The teachers’ academy was a precursor to the Middle-High Forum. In the academy setting, teachers worked on a variety of school improvement

⁵ What distinguishes justified belief from opinion.

⁶ A professional networking group for teachers in Western Pennsylvania

programs. When a majority of projects were directed toward transition, the Consortium for Public Education decided to turn the teachers academy into a Middle-High Forum specifically engaged in working on needs of Middle and High Schools within the same districts. At this point, the researcher joined the Middle-High Forum as a teacher working within a group representing a district not included in the study. The researcher was interested in the ways in which the other groups were working to ease transition in their districts along with the process of working toward that goal.

The researcher undertook an exhaustive study of existing literature concerning the middle to high school transition on a national scope. The researcher found that difficulty in transition for students moving from eighth to ninth grade was not just a problem in Western Pennsylvania. Rather, middle to high school transition was a problem throughout the country. Due to the findings in the research, a need for a study was established.

The next step in the methodology was talking to Mary Kay Babyak, Director of Initiatives for the Consortium for Public Education who is heavily involved in the daily operations of the Middle-High Initiative. The topic of a study was discussed and Babyak directed the researcher to ten Middle-High Initiative teams that were involved in creating transition programs for their district. Babyak also offered contact information for ten individuals within these groups that were most knowledgeable concerning the inner-workings of their group and who could act as a spokesperson or contact representing their groups for the purposes of a study. The districts in the recommended groups represent a broad spectrum of schools in terms of size, community history, and economic status. The groups themselves consist of members of teaching staff, guidance, and administrative staff from both the middle and high schools of given districts.

The researcher contacted each of the individuals suggested by Babyak via email. One group member per team was interviewed. Each email included the research questions listed in this paper to give individuals to be interviewed advanced notice. The researcher proposed an interview to be conducted through videoconference or via telephone. Nine of the ten group members contacted responded favorably to participating in the proposed interview. Of the nine that responded favorably, one member agreed to a videoconference using Skype, which is a video calling service via computer. Seven members agreed to a phone conference. One group member chose to type responses to the questions and email the response to the researcher. The Skype conference and all phone conferences were recorded in a program from Apple's ilife called GarageBand for eventual transcription. The recordings have been transcribed. The researcher listened to the recordings a second time in order to extract quotes that were powerful in representing various points that the group members discussed. These quotes were transcribed in the group members' own words and used in this paper.

This paper includes the description and analysis of the development of transition programs within the Middle-High Forum of the Consortium for Public Education. The Consortium for Public Education is part of the Public Education Network, but works specifically with school districts in Western Pennsylvania on initiatives from five categories; middle-high school transformation and networking being the categories pertinent to this paper. The researcher has used the descriptive study approach to examine the development of transition programs in schools involved in the Consortium network.

3.5 DESCRIPTION OF SUBJECTS BEING INTERVIEWED

For this study members of seven schools who belong to the Middle-High Forum within the Consortium for Public Education will be interviewed. Schools chosen in this study are located in Western Pennsylvania.

The Middle-High Forum employs two-year cohorts comprised of teams. The team structure consists of teachers drawn from middle and high schools as well as administrators and counselors from the middle school and high school.

The names of team members and school districts will not be used and participant have been given a letter of explanation, which informs the participant of the scope of the study in which they will be involved. Prior to interviews all documents required by the University of Pittsburgh's Internal Review Board have been approved.

3.6 MECHANISM FOR MOVING FORWARD

Consortium officials are interested in this study as a means of understanding where transition teams are in the process of building a program. Additionally officials are interested in how teams have used the Middle-High Forum of the Consortium for Public Education as a tool in the process. Findings will be shared with Consortium officials and any Consortium team members. Additionally, findings of this study will aid the Consortium in moving forward to help member schools create effective transition programs. Furthermore, any school district interested in creating a transition program can benefit from the documentation of the efforts of others who have gone before them in this endeavor.

3.6.1 Analysis of the data

For the purpose of this study, analysis of data will be done through content analysis. “Content analysis is a research technique for making reputable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004, p 18). In the case of this research texts are included, but the information extends to include data obtained from interviews that constitute the “meaningful matter” referred to above. Upon completion of interviews of transition program group leaders as defined by Babyak, recordings and field notes are analyzed to identify the major themes that develop in the interviews as well as minor themes that may surface. For the purpose of this study, major themes will be defined as those that occur in the majority of schools. This study includes nine schools yielding a majority at five. Also for the purpose of this study, minor themes will be defined as those themes that occur from two to four instances. A list of all major and minor themes will be assembled and discussed.

Analysis involves breaking up data and organizing the data into manageable pieces. In addition analysis involves synthesizing the data, looking for patterns in the data, as well as examining the thrust of what the data is telling us, what we have learned from the data, and finally reporting the data out to others (Bogdon & Biklen, 1992).

3.7 PILOT STUDY

The researcher has conducted an in-depth interview that set the direction for the formal study. The interview was conducted with key staff members of the Consortium for Public Education. The interviewees included Mary Kay Babyak, Robert Rodriguez, and John McGrail, from the

Consortium for Public Education. The Consortium is an organization that works for school improvement by networking schools throughout western Pennsylvania and pursuing resources for those member districts. The goal is to aid schools in creating an environment where they can work in a smarter, more efficient way. School districts are organizations that are comprised of extremely time strapped individuals caught up in the hectic pace of daily activity that work with limited funds. The Consortium provides an atmosphere where teachers working in district teams may take time out to work on school improvement. The Consortium also provides monetary help in implementing school improvement programs by funneling moneys from business grants that the Consortium works to attain (www.theconsortiumforpubliceducation.org/about.html).

During my discussions with consortium officials, I asked the essential question of why they have undertaken a project focusing on transition. They began to explain that a need arose from their work with the APEX teachers' academy. APEX was the precursor to the Middle-High Initiative, which is the current focus of the Consortium. In Apex, teacher leaders developed and honed their leadership skills while working on school improvement projects. Apex coordinators began to notice something. Many of the groups working in APEX became interested in focusing on the same school improvement goal. The goal that commonly arose was improving upon student experience concerning middle school to high school transition. The great majority of schools in Apex were having difficulty with kids in their ninth-grade year, specifically concerning low grades and a high numbers of referrals. Babyak, Rodriguez, McGrail and other staff members decided the need for easing transition from middle to high school was so great that they would focus the attention of Apex completely on transition. Apex became known as the Middle-High Initiative. Consortium personnel conducted an information session where they

expected to gain interest in joining the new initiative. The expectation early on was for six or seven schools to join the initiative. Rather than this anticipated response, the Consortium immediately had fifteen schools that wanted to join. The overwhelming response is a significant indicator that there was a need in regional schools to focus on transitioning our ninth-grade youngsters into high school.

Members of the consortium staff say that they believe the need has arisen for transition programs because so many of the supports that our students once had are no longer in place. For this reason, transition programs have become a necessity. The most significant support system that has changed is family. The face of the family has changed and this change has necessitated additional support from schools. The transition focus needs to be on the ninth-grade year of high school because students who do not begin in a successful manner will experience extreme difficulty in subsequent semesters or years.

Babyak and Rodriguez have stated that a study of local schools in their efforts to create a successful transition program would be valuable to the Consortium. The value exists in telling the story of various schools involved in the creation of transition programs because the study would chronicle the history of the Middle-High Forum. In addition, telling the story would give schools looking to begin a transition program a model in how to emulate successes and avoid pitfalls. The study would also give members of the Forum pause to reflect on their experience. Stories told would be especially valuable to the Consortium because an individual participating in the forum, rather than a staff member of the forum will act as the narrator. The history would work to give consortium staff valuable feedback.

When asked how transition needs in area schools compare to those nation wide, consortium staff said the needs were not quite as severe as one might see in large urban schools,

yet the need for transition still remains. One school in the consortium has a 17% dropout rate and did not realize this fact as a group until they took time to look at the data together. Although this percentage is not as high as urban schools on a national level, the rate is nevertheless alarming. Equally alarming is the fact that the high drop out rate was not known by all stakeholders⁷ until all were afforded the time to communicate.

Babyak and Rodriguez both agreed that there is no silver bullet transition program. They noted that they would be skeptical of anyone who claimed that there was such a cure-all. Rather, every district must examine their needs and what they want to accomplish and subsequently tailor the many options available in transition programs while creating new options that have never been employed before. They stress the importance of utilizing at least nine tools in a transition program that are tailored to the specific need of the school district.

The starting point for each district needs to be a focus on communication. Personnel from high school and middle school need to come to the table and talk. It is much harder to blame each other when people know one another by name and face. The blame referred to is the common blame game where high school points the finger at middle and middle school returns the finger pointing towards the high school. Communication minimizes this pitfall.

In terms of measuring success of teams working in the consortium, the design team employs a rubric to measure the success in the process of individual school district teams. The Rubric was constructed by Rodriguez and vetted by other staff members of the consortium. In terms of academic success for districts involved, success is measured by smart goals. Smart Goals are an acronym coming from five components. The goals are to be strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time-bound. Strategic goals should be high-priority,

⁷ Members of the school community.

specific, and should focus on being precise. The component “measurable” focuses on how the effectiveness of the goals will be assessed. “Attainable” means that goals should be within reach using the school’s existing resources. “Results-based” means that district goals identify outcomes that are measurable and observable. “Time-bound” means that the amount of time needed to accomplish a goal is identified in advance. The individual district, in order to target their problems and tailor efforts to their individual needs, creates its own smart goals. Whether a team meets its smart goals or not is the measure of success.

In fleshing out themes from the interview it is apparent that middle to high school transition is of paramount importance to schools involved in the Consortium for Public Education. It was because of this concern that the Consortium decided to create a program that would focus explicitly on transition for students moving from eighth to ninth grade.

4.0 MIDDLE HIGH TEAM LEADER INTERVIEWS

4.1 INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Chapter IV of the dissertation will focus on the interviews completed with individual leaders of their respective Middle-High Initiative teams. This chapter will include an analysis of participant responses to the research questions pertaining to this study. The study will flesh out themes found in conducting the research as well as examining the experience of various teams working on transition issues within the structure of the Middle-High initiative.

The interviews were conducted with nine team leaders in nine different Middle-High Initiative teams. Each team member served on his or her district's Middle High team for at least a period of three years. Three years is the length of time that the Middle-High Initiative has existed within the Consortium for Public Education. Names of the participants as well as the school districts they represent will not be used. In lieu of names a numeric system will be employed numbering 1 – 9. The nine schools interviewed were chosen because of their participation in the Middle High Forum and represent a variety of sizes and school cultures. Four of the participants are principals, two are central office administrators, two are teachers and one is a guidance counselor. All participants are Caucasian and one is female. All participants are from public schools in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

4.2 SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS

Charts have been included to help in understanding of the demographics of the schools in the study:

Table 1. School Demographics

District 1		
Student poverty rate	28%	
District Enrollment	3498	
Free – Reduced Lunch	51.5%	
White Students	92.5%	
African American Students	6.1%	
Hispanic Students	.6%	
Asian Students	.7%	

District 2		
Student poverty rate	28%	
District Enrollment	2247	
Free – Reduced Lunch	63.1%	
White Students	69.4%	
African American Students	25.0%	
Hispanic Students	.9%	
Asian Students	.5%	

District 3		
Student poverty rate	17%	
District Enrollment	1656	
Free – Reduced Lunch	41.6%	
White Students	96.6%	
African American Students	1.9%	
Hispanic Students	.2%	
Asian Students	.3%	

District 4		
Student poverty rate	3%	
District Enrollment	4103	
Free – Reduced Lunch	3.1%	
White Students	91.1%	
African American Students	1.1%	
Hispanic Students	.8%	
Asian Students	7.0%	

District 5		
Student poverty rate	13%	
District Enrollment	3087	
Free – Reduced Lunch	33.7%	
White Students	90.6%	
African American Students	8.2%	
Hispanic Students	.4%	
Asian Students	.7%	

District 6		
Student poverty rate	5%	
District Enrollment	3767	
Free – Reduced Lunch	6.3%	
White Students	94.4%	
African American Students	0.7%	
Hispanic Students	0.7%	
Asian Students	3.9%	

District 7		
Student poverty rate	21%	
District Enrollment	1155	
Free – Reduced Lunch	39.1%	
White Students	97.2%	
African American Students	1.7%	
Hispanic Students	0.3%	
Asian Students	0.5%	

District 8		
Student poverty rate	23%	
District Enrollment	1878	
Free – Reduced Lunch	47.4%	
White Students	64.2%	
African American Students	30.9%	
Hispanic Students	0.3%	
Asian Students	1.7%	

District 9		
Student poverty rate	16%	
District Enrollment	3290	
Free – Reduced Lunch	16.1%	
White Students	75.9%	
African American Students	22.7%	
Hispanic Students	0.7%	
Asian Students	0.1%	

4.3 MIDDLE-HIGH TEAM DESCRIPTIONS

Team leader #1 was a Curriculum Instruction Director from a school district fifty miles south of Pittsburgh in a town of approximately 12,000 people. The middle school holds grades 6-8 while the high school holds grades 9 -12. Total students attending middle school were 876 with 50 mostly Caucasian teachers while the high school has 1146 students with 67 teachers who are predominately Caucasian. The Middle High team is divided in three smaller groups working on three separate issues. Team one focuses on curtailing the number of dropouts, team two is focusing on the implementation of the Olweus anti-bully program, while the third team is focusing on an initiative called “Beginning Stages” which has the purpose of getting good starts for children in the elementary program. This team is unique because it extends the Middle-High transition model to the Elementary as well. Thus there is a focus on all stages of transition, kindergarten to Elementary, Elementary to Middle School, and Middle School to High School.

Team leader #2 was an assistant principal from a school district 75 miles northwest of Pittsburgh in a town with approximately 16,000 people. The configuration is a 7 -12 middle school/high school building. Total students in this building number 1097 with 66 teachers that are predominately Caucasian. This school employs a freshman academy.

Team leader # 3 was an assistant-superintendent from a district 10 miles south of Pittsburgh. The district has a small town within its suburban structure. It is a bedroom community of Pittsburgh. The configuration is a 7 – 12 middle school/high school building. Total students in this building number 868 with 61 teachers, predominately Caucasian. This district has recently settled a strike.

Team leader # 4 was a middle school guidance counselor and is the only female interviewed. Her district is in a large suburb 10 miles south of Pittsburgh. The configuration

consists of a 7th and 8th grade middle school with 664 students and 45 mostly Caucasian teachers feeding a high school which houses grades 9 -12 with 1435 students and 93 teachers who are predominately Caucasian. The district is affluent and parents are involved in the educational process.

Team leader # 5 was a director of secondary education from a suburban school district located in a city of almost 16,000 people about 40 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. It has a 6 -8 middle school with 716 students and 42 mostly Caucasian teachers and a high school with grades 9 – 12 with 1075 students and 61 teachers, predominately Caucasian. Dropout issues were of paramount concern for this district.

Team leader # 6 was a Principal of a ninth-grade academy in a district located in a suburb of east Pittsburgh. The configuration of the middle school is a 6 -8 building with 900 students and 63 mostly Caucasian teachers feeding a high school with 1268 students and 76 predominately Caucasian teachers. A major focus of this district is declining PSSA scores from 8th grade to 11th grade.

Team leader # 7 was a high school teacher in a rural district about 20 miles south of Pittsburgh. The middle school holds grades 6 - 8 with 258 students and 23 mostly Caucasian teachers while the high school houses grade 9 – 12 with 358 students and 26 predominately Caucasian teachers. These schools connect in the same building and together with one of their elementary buildings create a campus.

Team leader # 8 was a high school principal in a suburban district adjacent to Pittsburgh's south end. The middle school is a 6 – 8 building with 451 students and 36 mostly Caucasian teachers. The high school is a 9 – 12 building with 670 students and 47 teachers who are predominately Caucasian. This district has a major focus of improving PSSA scores.

Team leader # 9 was a middle school principal in a large suburban district 4 miles south of Pittsburgh. The middle school houses grades 6 – 8 with a total of 737 students and the high school enrolls 1231 students and the districts teachers are predominately Caucasian. District # 9 uses a Freshman Academy as a major transition tool.

4.4 INTERVIEWS

4.4.1 Research question # 1

Why did districts in this study begin to develop transition teams?

Upon examining what the interviewees had to say the theme of kids having difficulty moving from eighth to ninth grade became apparent. The perceived difficulty varied slightly from district to district although the most popular answers include finding higher class and grade failures in ninth grade as well as more discipline referrals.

Team leader # 1 noted that the difficulties seen in that district revolve around several issues. These issues include drop outs, ninth-grade students failing both year and individual classes, ninth-grade discipline issues, attendance and realizing that the students were not comfortable in their ninth-grade year based off of survey data. Team leader # 1 stated, “Dropout rates were increased, we had a large number of students retained, we had discipline issues on the rise, we surveyed students and saw that there wasn’t a comfort zone.” Team leader one went on to say, “We saw the red flags and said we’ve got to do something about this.”

Team leader # 2 began the discussion by saying, “We have seen a lot of national statistics about kids having problems in transition, especially going into the ninth grade.” His contention

was that these problems affect student performance concerning Adequate Yearly Progress⁸ and graduation rates stating, “This is important concerning AYP and graduation rates.” Team leader #2 clarified the need for transition empirically in stating “We tracked the senior year and realized that 27 kids dropped out and of those 27 kids, 21 had failed the ninth grade.” His group realized that their kids needed a better start. “We wanted to get to those kids early before they lose hope and interest.” The group had examined data that even further demonstrated a need for transition stating “any time a student made a transition there was a lapse in achievement.” When asked why he thought students had difficulty particularly in making the ninth grade transition he said “Developmentally as far as their maturity level, they are not that serious. Socially they think they are a lot more mature than they really are and get themselves in problems with older students.”

For team leader # 2 the main problem identified was not being able to meet AYP at the high school level. Upon studying national statistics on students having difficulty in the ninth-grade year, the district decided that ninth grade would be a logical place to focus resources toward continuous improvement. For this district, dropouts were also a factor as it relates to ninth grade in that of the 27 kids who dropped out during the tracking period, 21 students failed the ninth grade.

Team leader # 3 stated that the impetuous for developing a transition team for his district was project 720. This project was a state program that focused on improving the experience for students in the 720 days that they attend high school. The program was in the early stages and the high school wanted to jump on board and be a leader in the 720 movement. As group leader # 3 put it, “A large part of the 720 grant was transition from the middle school to the high

⁸ A measurement of academic performance mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act.

school.” The Middle-High Initiative was in its early stages of development and the district felt like joining the Initiative was a logical step in facilitating the goals of project 720. As part of the work in 720, teachers were asked about readiness of ninth grade students. The overwhelming response was “that students aren’t ready for ninth grade.” Clearly the district noted that when creating open discussion with ninth-grade teachers, most felt that kids were not entering high school prepared for the rigors that they were going to face both academically and socially.

Team leader # 4 stated that their need for creating a transition team came from the high school principal’s concerns about grades, performance, and discipline relating to the change between middle school and high school. Team leader # 4 said, “We had reservations and concerns about grades and discipline.” In addition to these issues, this district has effort-based grades in the middle school which rely heavily on effort in comparison to ability. When the kids reach high school, the more traditional and common A – F grading system comes into play. The change works to create shock in the ninth-grade year, as students are confused about requirements in earning grades within the letter system. As group leader four stated, “Kids get the best grade at the middle school and then go to the high school and get C’s and D’s. We were concerned about what that did to the kids’ self-esteem.” Community perception as it relates to the grading system at the middle school was a concern as well for this team as leader # 4 went on to say, “We have a common misconception in our community that middle school doesn’t count.”

For team leader #5 and his district the dropout rate was the issue of greatest concern. He expressed his concern saying, “We had a spike in our dropout rate.” This district was experiencing a 6 – 8% dropout rate per year. In one given year the dropout rate spiked to 13%. This alarming statistic started an investigation into why this event occurred. From the investigation they realized that once students were upperclassmen and wanted to leave school it

was too late to help. Team leader #5 said, “You don’t address your dropout problem when the kids are ready to quit.” Therefore, at risk students had to be reached at a much earlier time. The crucial time was found to be the ninth grade. As team leader #5 stated, “The more investigative work we did, the more we began to realize that the ninth grade year is a key year as to whether or not a student is successful.” He went on to say that, “a successful ninth grade year sets a foundation for success in high school.” He feels that for kids to experience success in high school teachers and administrators must focus on “getting kids to enter the ninth grade year as comfortable as they can be.”

For team leader #6, the need for transition developed around an apparent lack of understanding of course choices that eighth graders were exposed to before coming into ninth grade. Team leader # 6 stated, “We had a need for ninth graders entering to know more about the courses they were going to take.” In addition to this problem, a need developed concerning PSSA achievement. Team leader #6 stated, “I was determined to maintain our students’ growth curves that they’ve established through eighth grade. Eighth grade is the students’ peak level of performance, then they trail off after that.” The district wanted to create an environment where students would continue a positive growth trend. Team leader #6 stated, “The students come into a situation where they no longer have a close connection with their teachers and teachers don’t understand each student’s needs. The teachers don’t understand what other teachers are doing with the students. There is not a lot of collegiality between teachers or a strong relationship between teacher and student.” Team leader # 6 identifies his district’s issue in saying, “The problem was that we didn’t have the support system for the students to succeed at their previous rate as measured by the PSSA and letter grades.” This district felt that in order to

change the trends they saw with PSSA tests and grades, focus on the ninth-grade transition had to be paramount in their efforts.

Group #7 came to the realization of the need for transition from findings in 2004 that caused concern. As group leader #7 stated, “We found that there were an alarming number of ninth graders who had failed classes and an alarming number that had failed more than one class.” This group was also concerned about the social development of their students. Leader #7 noted challenges that the kids face socially in saying, “The social issues, that acclimatization of moving from the middle school setting to the high school setting, becoming more independent and self-motivated. We wanted to address those as well.” Something had to be done to transition these students in a way that would facilitate greater success.

As for group #8, their need arose from the realization that both parents and students were having a hard time with transition from eighth to ninth grade as it relates to new expectations. Group leader #8 stated, “We identified one of the major problems in our district to be the transition from one building to another. This is a challenge not only for students but also for parents.” Expectations needed to be outlined and communicated in better way.

Finally, group #9 felt that kids were losing themselves and their connectedness to the district and each other as they moved from one building to another. Leader #9 said:

“We want to work with our students to make transition easier because when you transition from one building to another you lose kids for a while and if you have a successful transition plan you eliminate the newness of the building. You can help the student succeed as opposed to hoping they catch themselves or hope that they hit the ground running.”

Of paramount concern to this group was “our freshman failure rate and suspensions.” In fact, this school’s freshman were failing at a rate of 12% per year. Team leader #9 stated that their school, “saw high retention, a lot of failures, a lot of kids that didn’t seem to know where they were going, didn’t know how to fit in, what kind of student they were going to be, or what path they were on.” They realized that the national trend pointed out ninth grade as a crucial year in creating success in high school. High retention rates and failures were the critical issue that the group thought the district could curb by focusing on ninth grade. In addition, this group observed the problem of higher discipline referrals.

4.4.2 Research question # 1 summary

The schools interviewed realized the importance of the ninth grade year in giving their students the type of start that fostered a successful high school career. The schools faced different challenges ranging from grading policies to ninth grade failures. Regardless, every school realized how critical a successful ninth grade year is to students.

Summary of major and minor themes: Question #1

Major themes A and B emerged from the data pertaining to this question:

Major theme 1: The theme of “red flags” which include spikes in dropout rates, poor attendance, lower grades in ninth grade than earned in previous years, spiking numbers of discipline referrals, and class and grade failures.

Of the nine schools studied in this dissertation, seven districts mentioned that they had noticed “red flags” as they related to spikes in the problems mentioned above. It is in large part because of these problems that the groups decided to develop transition programs for their ninth graders.

Major theme 2: Developmental maturity was lacking with incoming students.

Five groups in the study specifically pointed to a lack of developmental maturity in students moving from eighth to ninth grade. Interviewees mentioned that students were only living for the present and did not have a life plan or even an academic plan for their high school years. In addition group spokespersons stated that kids were not prepared to pick classes and did not realize the importance of grades in the high school beginning with the ninth-grade year.

A variety of minor themes developed from this data as well. These minor themes are discussed below.

Minor theme 1: The use of literature is critical in establishing the need for a transition program.

Four different groups identified literature dealing with transition difficulty for incoming ninth graders across the nation as important in moving their district to create their own transition programs. This data prompted districts to focus on investigating problems unique to ninth graders within districts involved in this study. The subsequent investigations yielded the findings that ninth-grade students in Southwestern Pennsylvania are having difficulty transitioning into high school.

Minor theme 2: Having been a member of the Apex teachers' academy, the precursor to the Middle-High Forum, was key in creating a transition program.

Two of the groups stated that part of the reason that they began focusing on transition was their involvement in Apex. This involvement gave member districts time to look into the matter of transition. The investigation promulgated by the APEX effort helped them decide to focus efforts on the issue of transition.

Minor theme 3: Connectivity of student to school is a key to success. Ninth graders are often lacking in this area.

Two groups mentioned a lack of connectivity with the school as a major reason to focus on creating a transition program. This includes feeling that teachers know and care about the students and that students have a stake in what is going on in some aspect of the school in an extra-curricular manner such as musicals, plays, clubs, or sports.

Minor theme 4: Teachers have concerns about incoming students being unprepared.

Two district spokespersons noted that teachers had voiced their concern about students that were not prepared to complete ninth-grade work and handle the new responsibility that comes with new freedoms and increased course loads.

4.4.3 Research question # 2

At the inception of your transition teams, what did your team believe were the solutions to solving transition issues in your district?

The prevailing theme that arose in the responses to this question in all cases except one was that transition was a major issue in their building and that a variety of remedies for the problem were attempted. Brainstorming and group thought was deemed important in most cases and many of the groups looked to existing models to create success. The Johns-Hopkins model for a freshman course was a popular design template for the ninth-grade seminar class.

Team leader # 1 indicated a variety of solutions that they believed would work. Team leader # 1 stated that his group felt, “the biggest piece was providing a credit recovery⁹ program.” The primary solution was a credit recovery program where any students in danger of failing Math or English after semester break were required to attend an after-school tutoring program to recover the credit. Team leader # 1 described this initiative stating, “We set up tutoring teachers with classroom teachers. If they failed a section on fractions their tutoring teacher would work with the student to recover that grade.” As far as results are concerned from this initiative: “In one year we saw results, large gains.” The district also created a Freshman Seminar course out of the John-Hopkins model. As team leader # 1 stated, “We developed a freshman seminar course. It’s the only specific course that every high school student has to take to provide the teacher as a mentor so the student can become more acquainted to the high school beyond guidance.” This course involves learning the student handbook, career building, problem solving, and study skills. In addition, a main component of their efforts provided a teacher-

⁹ Remediation that is ongoing during the school year for students who are not achieving at a passing level.

mentor program for students. In this program a teacher is assigned a small group of ninth grade students to mentor and monitor. Furthermore, this district instituted a Perfect Attendance program rewarding perfect attendance with a gift card. This effort was initiated to focus on attendance issues. Finally, district #1 implemented various orientation activities and focused on creating their own cyber school¹⁰.

This group was operating on the belief that as its leader stated, “The more supports you have, the more programming you have, the better its going to be, and the more chances you can have to make students successful.” This belief is an affirmation of assertions made by Hertzog that were chronicled earlier in this paper.

Team leader # 2 stated that their team wanted to acquire information at the inception of the process. They did so by meeting as a group within the Middle-High Initiative to brainstorm and open communication. The overriding perception gathered was that there was a disconnect between the community and the schools. As team leader # 2 said, “We felt we weren’t using enough of the community’s resources.” In order to confirm or deny this belief this group gave a survey consisting of 40 questions to the teachers, students, parents, and school board members. They found that their perceptions were correct. As team leader # 2 stated, “When the survey was tallied, it showed there was a disconnect between school and community.” In order to create better communication with kids and parents, this group instituted an orientation that focused on creating a positive start to the freshman year without negative misconceptions. This team felt that working on credit recovery and creating their own cyber school would help with the difficulties ninth graders were having. Additionally the team believed a focus on creating a mentoring program would help to ease transition. As team leader # 2 said, “ “The problem was

¹⁰ Teaching courses primarily through online methods.

that teachers didn't get to know the kids." The idea for a mentor program was a step in the direction for the teachers to get to know the kids. Finally the group created an academy that works with about 20 of the most at risk kids not having an Individualized Educational Program.

This group understood the importance of students starting off their high school career on the right foot. As team leader # 2 said, "A positive start makes a big difference for the kids."

Group # 3 felt that teacher empowerment was the key. As group leader # 3 put it, "Administrators can't say this is what you are going to do and this is how you are going to do it. Rather we need to say to teachers these are the issues, what can you do to make them non-issues." District #3 put groups of teachers together that were going to be able to initiate buy in of positive ideas to the faculty. These teams were geared around the ideas of Project 720. They also felt it was important to separate the ninth graders logistically from the rest of the school.

Group # 4 decided to brainstorm in order to find ways to improve transition. What they believed should be a strong focal point was better communication between middle and high school teachers. As she put it, "We needed conversation between middle school and high school to identify a better picture of what was happening." Another point where the group focused on smooth transition was in simplifying the course recommendation process by leaving the recommendations to the teachers rather than bringing guidance into the process. As group leader #4 stated, "Who better to identify what the student is capable of doing than the teacher who had them in the classroom for a year?" Another area that this group wanted to focus on was modifying the report cards. Further, this group thought that adding a mentoring program, streamlining special education services between middle and high schools, and creating K – 12 curriculum meetings to improve communication would help ease transition for their in-coming ninth graders.

Group # 5 was an outlier in that it originally did not think transition was a big problem in their district. Group leader # 5 stated, “We did not think transition was a big issue.” They already had orientation activities in place for their eighth graders who were moving into ninth grade. They thought all that was needed was a little bit of tweaking to the activities to make the existing program more effective.

At first, group #6 moved to: “collaborate very purposefully and effectively together to meet student need academically and developmentally” as their group leader stated. In addition, they thought that the students needed a class on note taking and reading. The group also thought that intervention time was needed to work with kids slipping behind in their ninth-grade year. It was believed that the district needed to personalize the teaching process and the courses for students to make curriculum more relevant in the high school. As group leader # 6 stated, “We needed to make the whole year more personal. The personalization piece is very important.” The group wanted students themselves to feel connected to the faculty by ramping up efforts on the part of teachers to get to know their students better.

The concerns that group #7 had revolved around ninth grade failures. Research was the group’s first focus. As team leader #7 said, “We found out through our research that we weren’t alone, that many districts across the United States have faced the same problem with the transition year between middle school and high school.” Looking further into their particular situation they notice that their kids were not well organized. As group leader #7 states, “We looked for a reason that kids were not being successful and found that a main reason was poor organization that students seem to have.” In addition to this problem, too many students did not do their homework. As leader #7 said, “Many students seemed to accept the fact that they didn’t have to do homework or that homework wasn’t important.” Group #7 moved to address

transition problems early on by creating a Freshman Orientation class. This class was the result of the group brainstorming a curriculum and included a one-semester course. This course had four, four and a half week long sessions or components including writing skills, study skills, research, and careers.

Group leader # 8 stated, “Our initial team realized that we needed to have “buy-in” from all of the stakeholders.” In doing so this school’s team included parents, teachers, and administrators. The desire was to create better communication. As team leader # 8 put it, “Basically, the solutions for most of these issues dealt with better communication among staff, administrators, students, and parents.” The main thrust in the beginning stages was to create a ninth-grade orientation day.

Finally, the team leader for group # 9 stated that their beginning efforts were focused on creating a ninth-grade academy. Of primary focus in the initial group stage as group leader #9 stated is, “the creation of the Freshman Academy and making a small learning community within the big high school.” This group was successful in this mission. The academy consisted of three teams of 100 kids in smaller learning communities. The group felt that it was important for every ninth-grade teacher to know all of their kid’s names, learning profile, and interests. The teams each have four core areas of Math, Science, English, and social studies and students are housed in designated team areas. In addition to these efforts the Middle-High group instituted a step up day for incoming ninth graders.

4.4.4 Research Question # 2 Summary

Every school in this study except # 5 was clearly aware that transition issues in their school districts existed. However, every school realized the importance of discussion of issues and

collaborating within their own group. Through this process, most of the schools realized that better communication was critical in improving middle to high school transition, whether it was communication from middle school teachers to high school teachers, from teacher to student, or from school to community, communication was key.

Summary of major and minor themes: Question #2

Two major and two minor themes developed around the response to the realization that a problem existed within study member schools in terms of transition from eighth to ninth grade.

Major theme 1: The majority of schools developed similar programs in order to deal with the problems of transition. The employment of Freshman Academies are of special note because regardless of how they are employed, they take on characteristics of the middle school concept grouping kids in some fashion where closeness to a small group of teachers is encouraged and finding identity with other group members is stressed.

The package of programs clearly became three pronged with all nine schools using a freshman orientation program, six schools using a variation of a freshman academy, and five schools using a mentor program. Most orientation programs involved bringing prospective ninth-grade students into the high school before the first day. The goal of this effort is to allow the students to become familiar with the physical structure of the building and to put a name with a face regarding their teachers. Mentor programs took on two main looks. Some programs were teacher to student while others were upperclassmen to lowerclassmen. Issues dealt with were both social and academic. The make up of ninth grade academies varied with some consisting of the whole ninth grade

as a separate entity to others taking twenty-five of the most needy kids and offering special support. Regardless, grouping of ninth-grade students with the goal of focused educational, social, and emotional attention was the main thrust of this effort.

Major theme 2: Employment of a Freshman Seminar program.

Five out of the nine schools used a freshman seminar program where study skills along with Math and English content focus were stressed. Such a finding is telling in that there is a specific concern over kids knowing the basics when reaching high school.

Minor theme 1: The Johns-Hopkins model is a commonly used tool.

Three of the nine schools have turned to the Johns-Hopkins model in creating their Freshman Seminar Program. This model stresses career skills, science and math, public speaking, and research as modules of instruction for all ninth graders.

Minor theme 2: Communication and teacher empowerment are key areas to beginning work that focuses on easing transition.

Three of the schools began their efforts with getting their teachers on board in working on the problem of transition through brainstorming. Brainstorming in this case involves teachers tapping their expert power to suggest ways of implementing initiatives that will ease transition for their students. The other component that was of great import is communication between the middle school and high school teachers. Such communication helps middle school teachers set goals for their outgoing students and gives high school teachers a better idea from where their

students are coming in terms of material learned and skills acquired. Communication between middle and high school teachers also gives the latter better knowledge of the social, emotional, and academic needs of their incoming students.

4.4.5 Research question # 3

As of the present time, has your original plan for easing transition changed? If so what are you doing differently compared to the original plan?

The major theme in examining the answers to this question concerned change that had to be made by Middle-High teams almost across the board. The most common change was the way in which the Freshman Class was administered. This change most commonly involved the timing of the class or the way that the class was graded.

Some of the variations experienced included one group feeling that they needed to step back and slow their efforts down focusing on success in one area. Another group realized that they were not originally doing enough to ease their students' transition and ramped up their efforts significantly. Group # 3 had an unexpected cultural change throw the timing of their plans off significantly. A final group felt that their original plan was running smoothly and needed to change very little. Over all it seems that most of the schools had similar plans to put in place, but had to change their plan to fit the culture and needs of their districts.

For team # 1 a major change came in the way that they conducted their credit recovery program. Credit recovery refers to finding students who are failing the ninth-grade year and giving them remediation and credit upon successful completion of the failed credit. It is a second chance at success for students who have failed. As team leader # 1 stated, "We found

that the semester break was too late to dig out of a hole for credit recovery.” At first the group felt that the beginning of the second semester would be adequate but now realize that this time frame was too late. They have decided to move the start of this program to the beginning of the second nine weeks in order to catch struggling students earlier. The other change made to their original plans is the timing of their Freshman Seminar course. Originally, this course was a semester long. As leader # 1 put it, “The freshman seminar has been successful but we needed to pair it down to an all year course that is three days on and three days off.” Hence the course has been moved to a six-day cycle of three days in Freshman Seminar class, and three days in an elective class. This move acts to spread the class out so that struggling students have more time to obtain help throughout the year rather than feeling squeezed into one semester.

Cyber-school was creating unique challenges for this district and its students, but it was not a focus of their original transition efforts. As team leader # 1 stated:

“We started to see a large number of kids go to cyber-school, get kicked out because they didn’t do their hours, then want to re-enroll after floundering. They were a year behind with no credits and ultimately they would end up meeting their demise and dropping out of school. That is a national trend that I saw in my district.”

This trend led the district to focus effort on creating an in-house cyber-school. The district is now reaping the benefits of these efforts as they are noticing a movement of students from cyber-schools not associated to the district to the district created cyber-school.

All tolled, for district #1, their transition program has been effective as measured by a reduction in failure rates. As leader #1 put it, “In year one of implementation 50% of failures were gained. Within one year we were able to cut ninth grade failures by one half from 54 to 27.”

District #2 needed to change its original plan because more training for teachers was required. Leader #2 said, “We have gotten away from the original plan. Originally we moved too fast. Things weren’t as planned out as they should have been.” As a result, they had to scale back on their initial plans. The district was trying to accomplish too many initiatives without adequate teacher training while omitting the necessary focus on course selection in the ninth grade. Consequently, the group decided to focus on creating their Ninth Grade Academy directed toward the most at risk students without an IEP.

For group #3, a great deal has changed because of difficult contract negotiations with district teachers. This group also had to cut back their plans and re-focus. As leader #3 stated, “The entire focus of the group changed to culture and moral.” Thus the group focus became creating a positive culture in the district once again. As for the thrust of their efforts toward transition, consistency in culture from middle school to high school became paramount. As leader #3 put it, “We are going to focus on culture, but when kids move from building to building we want them to see consistency.”

This group has individual teacher teams called RISE teams that work through the Middle-High Initiative to create a better culture in the school district. The plan is that when the positive culture returns, they will refocus on the issue of transition. It is important to note that despite their recent setbacks, many of their transition pieces are still in tact. As leader #3 stated, “We have our classes housed in the building by grade level, we have mentoring, step up day, orientation career focus, and Freshman Seminar class.” However, moving to the next level has been hindered by the recent contract difficulties. Even with the adversity this district has faced, they have moved ahead with a cyber-school that they are hoping will encourage kids to return to their system.

Group # 4 had great success with their original plans of attacking four main issues or hot-topics as identified by their Middle-High groups. This group was able to move on to a focus on smoothing their district curriculum kindergarten through twelfth grade and assuring that kids were getting the course material and coverage they needed without overlap. As leader #4 stated, “Our first two years were concentrated on social and emotional issues and now we are looking at streamlining curriculum.”

For group #5 a great deal has changed from the inception of their groups as well. Group #5 at first felt that they needed little change, but have since realized that they needed big changes to the way transition is handled in their district. As leader #5 stated, “We went from thinking there wasn’t anything to do to realizing that there are a lot of viable solutions to help easing transition.” The first change made was in creating better communication between eighth and ninth-grade staffs. The team has also created better communication between the middle school guidance department and the high school guidance department concerning specific needs of at-risk kids. They have started a mentoring program where seniors are matched up with incoming freshman and have revamped their Freshman Seminar. In addition, the district has created a summer success program where they invite the most at-risk eighth graders into the high school during summer in the hopes of creating an early connection to their new school. During this program the students are also given a start on building skills needed for the ninth grade.

Team leader # 5 had this to say about the teaming concept, “As a middle school principal I realized the power of teaming where teachers have a core group of students they can support.” For group five this belief transferred into the creation of ninth-grade teaming similar to a Freshman Academy.

Finally, the group has begun instituting a program of Individual Pathways. This program requires kids to be involved in creating a living document that is meaningful and accessible concerning the plan for their secondary education as it relates to their life after high school.

As for team #6, this group has confirmed that they needed collaborative time for their teachers to meet and students were benefitting from their Success Class. As team leader #6 stated, “We confirmed the collaborative time is working well. We confirmed that the need for the success (seminar) class was there.” This class works similarly to what others call their Freshman Seminar class. This class was pass/ fail originally and the team leader who is also the Ninth Grade Academy Principal needed to put more parameters into what pass/ fail meant. One of the ways he did this is by creating two assessments each quarter that must be passed to show mastery of subject matter.

Team # 7 experienced change as they revamped their Freshman Seminar class into the Johns-Hopkins model and moved the class from the end of the day to the beginning of the day. The goal of this change was to organize students and check that they are doing their homework. The group changed the course from a semester long course to a yearlong course which has four modules. And as group leader #7 states, “One of the biggest changes we made was to our Freshman Seminar where all of the same teachers are teaching the same things in modules.” These modules include career skills, a Science and Math module, a public speaking module, and a research module rounding out the four areas.

Group #8 has changed its original plan by creating a middle school style schedule in the ninth grade. As team leader # 8 put it, “As of 2010-2011 school year the high school will implement a schedule that simulates a middle school with a rotation period. Ninth graders will also be scheduled into a rotation period to explore the different options within the elective

fields.” This will see students taking the four core or main classes of Math, Science, English, and social studies. Additionally students will rotate their elective classes by nine weeks.

Team leader # 9 stated that not much has changed to the core of their original plan. They are determined to continue with the ninth grade academy and continuously tweak and improve their program.

4.4.6 Research question # 3 summary

All groups save group # 9 experienced an evolution in their original plan. Some plans made more of an evolution than others. For such change to take place it is evident that these groups are reflecting upon what efforts seem to be working and what efforts need changing. Additionally, these groups are not afraid to make the necessary changes when needed.

Summary of major and minor themes: Question #3

The response to this research question yielded one major theme and two minor themes.

Major theme 1: All groups experienced an evolution from their original plan.

Each group changed their original plan in one form or another. For some groups this action consisted of little more than minor changes while other groups had to scale back their efforts significantly because their original plan was too ambitious at the time or because of extenuating circumstances such as a teacher strike.

Minor theme 1: Groups felt that a change was needed to their Freshman Seminar class.

Four of the nine groups reported that they felt a change was necessary for their Freshman Seminar course. These changes

included changing the subject matter, changing the time of day in which the course was given, and changing the grading policy for this class.

Minor theme 2: A focus on creating in-district cyber schools.

Four of the nine team leaders indicated that during the time period in which the first cohort of the Middle-High Initiative met, a greater need has come to light in creating on-line schooling within the district. This initiative has been put in place in order to hold on to students who may look for out-of-district cyber-schools. Team leaders reported that students who left for a cyber-school often returned to their home district with diminished skills compared to their peers. The returning students, because of falling behind more, become even stronger candidates for dropping out. Keeping students in-district as part of the home district cyber-school, team leaders feel will curtail this problem. The incentive for students to stay, according to team leaders is that students and parents alike want a diploma from their local school.

4.4.7 Research question # 4

What resources from the Consortium for Public Education has your team been able to draw upon and what resources from the Consortium are you currently using?

Upon asking this question to team leaders one major theme became clear. The groups belonging to the Middle-High Initiative felt that they benefitted from the networking that is

facilitated with other Initiative members. This networking allows colleagues to exchange ideas and find solutions from other districts that have been in similar circumstances. Such solution finding is cost effective and time efficient. Another major theme according to the research findings is an appreciation of the Consortium consultants and their expertise in seeing barriers that the groups may encounter in the implementation of their initiatives. A third theme is the appreciation of the Consortium's data consultant who can help identify problems and/or solutions by helping groups conduct a thorough study of the data. Yet a fourth major theme is the appreciation of the time groups have to work and communicate outside of the building. This time is crucial in giving groups a vehicle for identifying problems in their district and the ability to organize and attack those problems. Other minor themes have arisen as it relates to this question. These themes include obtaining grants for projects from the Consortium for Public Education, having research made available to them by the Middle-High facilitators, and the break out sessions provided by Middle-High facilitators that help in showing models of various initiatives already in place in member districts.

Team leader # 1 stated that contacts made in the Middle-High Initiative would rank as the number one resource provided. As he put it, "The resources we are currently using are the contacts with colleagues within the Consortium. The biggest resource to date that we have taken from the Consortium is collegial sharing." He went on to say that sharing ideas with colleagues is critical specifically saying, "When we meet, the time to share what we are doing and what other schools are doing is invaluable. We have taken so many ideas from other districts within the Consortium." He believes that having time with colleagues in one's own school is very important as well to brainstorm ideas and improve communication. In addition, he states that the data consultant provided by the Middle-High Initiative is key in learning where problems need to

be attacked stating, “meeting with Jim Shriber (data consultant to the Consortium) and looking at our goals to organize them in a way to create success is critical.” The group may identify a problem on their own expertise, but through data analysis his group was better able to identify solutions to the problem. In addition such data studies help garner support from the rest of the staff and the school board if needed. If a group has data to back up the need for an initiative, their colleagues back at school and local board members as well will be more likely to buy into the solution. He mentions educational resources such as scholarly articles as being of great importance as well stating, “The Consortium provides educational resources for us finding recent articles, and studies.” He also mentions that the Initiative helps a great deal with setting attainable goals for the Middle-High group and with following through with group members to make sure that they are reaching these goals. He specifically stated that, “the Middle-High Forum has provided time and structure to set goals and they make sure that the goals are reachable.”

Team leader #2 stated that the mentoring program introduced at Middle-High meetings has been the major resource that they have put in place. Secondly, he mentions the contacts and networking with other schools and having an opportunity to talk to other districts as a tremendous time saver and resource. He states, “The contacts we make and the networking that takes place with schools that have similarities is invaluable. Our teachers like to talk to other districts and steal some of their ideas.” In addition to the aforementioned, Team leader #2 states that the Middle-High Initiative introduced his district to career resources that they have been able to use in their Freshman Seminar class.

Team leader # 3 states that the wisdom and knowhow of the consultants in the Middle-High Initiative was invaluable. He said, “They know what we need to do to change to make

programs successful. They see what our roadblocks are, and they know that it is o.k. to learn from mistakes, but we can also learn by not having to deal with mistakes.” These consultants know the roadblocks and offer guidance in how to avoid these roadblocks.” In addition, he mentioned that networking with the other districts was of great importance as well as the time that they have to work with colleagues within their district without distractions. There were also various resources from the Consortium for Public Education that were important to this district such as Ning which is the Consortium’s professional networking website, grant money, and the Consortium’s literacy campaign.

Team leader # 4 stated that time together as a Middle-High group was clearly the most important resource offered. She said, “the biggest and best thing that we got out of transition teams was having time set aside to focus on things.” In addition, funding and the breakout sessions on mentoring were very helpful for this district. She says that networking is helpful sometimes, but that their problems are unique in her district and there is little to draw upon from the other groups in terms of similar stories.

Team leader # 5 stated that the ability to network was the number one asset offered by the Middle-High Initiative. As he states, “One of the things we like about APEX and the Consortium is the collaboration between teachers and administrators to create a learning community. I have a list of people and connections now.” In addition he felt that it was crucial to enable the team to get off site and focus on initiatives on which they were working. He also mentioned that Middle-High consultants were able to give an excellent perspective or a good reference in terms of where to go to find a model that would be good to use for a given initiative. He also stressed that teacher leadership, which is a major goal of the Middle-High Initiative was important in fostering leadership within their district. Additionally, he feels that putting the

power of student voice within the school as an important component of a high functioning school district was a powerful idea introduced by the Middle-High Initiative. Upon being introduced to this idea, his district subsequently has made student voice an important goal for their immediate future. Finally, team leader # 5 stressed the importance of working with the data consultant for the Middle High Initiative, Jim Shriber stating, “he helped us realize that if we get a kid to be successful in ninth grade there is a good chance they will graduate.” The importance of driving home this idea cannot be understated.

Team leader # 6 felt that the opportunity to network was the most important resource offered by the Middle-High Initiative stating, “the opportunity to talk to everybody and see what other schools are doing is most valuable.” He said that networking was important in gathering ideas to implement in his district. In addition, he mentioned that employing a statistician working within the Middle High Initiative was very valuable. Also, the expertise that the consultants in the Initiative provide was valuable as well as leader # 6 attested, “to bounce ideas off of Mary Kay and John, and Bob Rodriguez has been helpful.” Equally valuable was the planning time outside of the building, literature and research provided in the way of scholarly journals.

Team leader # 7 stated, “one of the biggest advantages that I get from the Middle-High forum is networking.” He goes on to say, “it’s a really nice opportunity when professionals can sit down and share ideas with the understanding that other people are going to hear what you are doing and maybe use some of those ideas for their own purpose.” He liked the way in which networking is facilitated in that groups are able to adapt each other’s initiatives to their building without jealousy or secretiveness. In other words, the environment is communal rather than competitive. He also had this to say about consultants working within the Middle-High

Initiative: “the people that work for the Consortium are very good when it comes to organizing opportunities for people to be together. They have activities planned that allow you to open conversation and to generate ideas between one another.” Additionally, he said that Great Idea Grants offered by the Middle-High Initiative’s parent entity, the Consortium for Public Education were valuable.

Team leader # 8 stated that the Consortium has been supportive and has provided them with a network from which to pull information. He finds the ability to discuss issues with other schools valuable stating, “By associating within the network we have been able to discuss issues with other schools who have already gone through the process.” Although they have to adapt programs from other districts that are already in use because of their unique needs, he feels that they are better able to avoid reinventing the wheel when it comes to employing an initiative.

Team leader # 9 rounds out the discussion by citing the benefits of networking: “meeting with the different schools to see what they do and networking is the most valuable resource.” He gives great value to seeing what other area schools are doing in terms of school improvement initiatives.

4.4.8 Research question # 4 summary

The majority of the districts in the study feel that the most valuable resource they ascertain from working within the Middle-High Initiative is the networking with the other schools in the group. All of the schools felt that networking was important. The advice provided by Middle-High consultants and the data help provided was seen as a major help by various groups.

Summary of major and minor themes: Question #4

The responses to this research question yielded two major themes and two minor themes.

Major theme 1: Networking is a vital resource provided by the Middle-High forum.

Taking ideas and sharing them with colleagues was identified by all nine Team Spokespersons as an important resource provided by the Middle-High Initiative. The majority of the interviewees identified networking as the most important resource. One individual described the type of exchanges between schools as adapting the ideas of colleagues without jealousy or secretiveness.

Major theme 2: Structured time to meet off site is valuable to groups working within the Middle-High forum.

Five of the group spokespersons identified time to work together with colleagues from their own school district off-site as an important resource. School settings are more often than not extremely busy hubs of activity where teaching and learning take place and daily problems are addressed. School staff has very little time to plan for major initiatives, reflect on practice, or even communicate with colleagues in a meaningful way. Time that is taken out of school to work with colleagues on initiatives is a crucial resource provided by the Middle-High Initiative. Moreover the time set aside is structured where there is an expectation for groups to have an action plan complete with goals and a timetable.

Minor theme 1: Wisdom of middle-high staff including data consultant is a valuable resource.

Four of the schools in the study identified Middle-High staff as a crucial resource in avoiding stumbling blocks in the implementation of initiatives.

Working with the Middle-High data expert was specifically identified as

valuable in helping member teams ask the right questions in the act of gathering data and subsequently making meaning of the data.

Minor theme 2: Exposure to literature and program possibilities is identified as a valuable resource.

Again, four individuals interviewed identified exposure to literature and programs in the region that are available to local school districts as crucial. Coming to know through scholarly articles and the introduction of groups to various programs in the region facilitates the broadening of the knowledge base of member districts.

4.5 CONCLUSION

This piece of the literature used interviews from nine different group leaders to answer questions dealing with reasons for creating transition teams within the parameters of the Middle-High Initiative of the Consortium for Public Education. The interview questions also dealt with examining the path that each group took to accomplish their goals. In addition, the interviews examined how membership in the Middle-High Initiative affected each group's efforts in creating initiatives to ease transition for students from middle school to high school. The responses given by team leaders were categorized into major and minor themes as well listed by team leader response to each question asked. Responses were favorable as they relate to membership in the Middle-High Initiative. This finding is a theme that will be further examined in the next chapter.

5.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 SUMMARY

In this dissertation study, the researcher interviewed nine team leaders from groups whose main purpose is to ease transition for students leaving the eighth grade for ninth grade. The groups were part of the Middle-High Initiative body of the Consortium for Public Education. The intent was to research the identification of a need for focus on transition and the subsequent process of working to meet those needs within a district. Further, the study examines the value of working toward such a goal within the structure of the Middle-High Initiative. Seven of nine team leaders were interviewed by phone. One team member was interviewed via Skype videoconference and another was interviewed survey style using open-ended questions and responses. The interviews were recorded using computer software and transcribed for analysis. This chapter will offer conclusions on the need for transition programs within Southwestern Pennsylvania. In addition this chapter will examine the benefit for using existing knowledge and practice in a networking fashion within an organized networking system to address the needs of students making the transition from eighth to ninth grade. This chapter will also examine the implications of the research and possible modifications to the study with the goal of helping educators improve the transition experience. Both major and minor themes have emerged from the research questions given in this study. Major themes as defined in this study are identified

when like responses have occurred in five or more districts out of the nine studied. Minor themes as defined in this study are identified when like responses occur two to four times. The research questions were given to group spokespersons recommended by Mary Kay Babyak who is a facilitator in the Middle High forum. The themes have been organized around the research questions asked.

5.2 CONCLUSIONS

Several major themes came out of the interviews. The theme of finding common areas of concern by the majority of schools was significant in providing the impetus for schools to begin looking into the area of transition. These areas include drop out rates, poor attendance, lower grades in ninth grade than in previous years, spiking numbers of referrals, and class and grade failures. Most of the schools in the study experienced these difficulties with their students as they entered the ninth grade year. As they realized these problems, districts became convinced of the need for action to be taken to help correct them.

The theme of most teams from the schools interviewed feeling maturity was lacking on the part of their incoming students was important as well. District teachers believed students were not prepared for the rigors of high school. The schools in the study looked for ways in which students could be helped in coping with the social and emotional rigors that they were to face in high school. The creation of transition programs was their response.

In addition, the theme of creating a specific freshman course focused on the academic skills needed to succeed in later years of high school was prevalent. The class was given a

number of different names but held common curricular components such as study and research skills, math, computers, and a career exploration component.

Also, the theme of the formation of academies or teams in the ninth grade year that resemble teaming from the middle school concept was among the most important. It highlighted the connectedness of students to each other and to particular teachers as vital in making the student feel as though they have support and with this support they can reach their educational goals. In addition to the teaming concept carried over from the middle school, most of the schools used similar programs including freshman orientation, mentor programs, and a specific class in the ninth grade focused on ninth grade needs.

Additionally, the theme that most of the schools experienced a change in the original plan for transition was major. School districts came up with game plans to help ease the transition of their students and while most experienced success, most also felt that their plans needed improvement upon implementation. Any district looking to create a transition program of their own must realize that they will likely find their own pitfalls in the process. These pitfalls will demand a response including making changes to their original plan. It is also evident that districts astute enough to want to affect positive change by creating a transition program will look to continuously improve by evaluating their transition efforts.

Another important theme was that of networking within the Initiative having extreme value. Having a network of resources was found to be valuable by the majority of districts in the study. Group leaders stated that having each other as resources when looking for answers was of tremendous import. They felt as though they did not have to re-invent the wheel, so to speak, when embarking on the creation of their transition programs. Rather they could tap the various districts within the Middle-High Initiative for their knowhow and experience.

Finally, the theme of districts lauding the time away from the school in which individual team members could meet and discuss difficulties in middle to high school transition and possible solutions to those problems was important. The schedule of educators, administrators and teachers alike is very structured and full. There is little time to discuss the problems concerning transition of students from eighth to ninth grade and the time to work in groups provided by the Middle-High Initiative was seen by the majority of schools as very valuable. It was within this meeting time that schools were able to get a handle on the problems concerning transition that were unique to their students and begin taking action to remedy these problems.

5.3 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The groups studied had a variety of ways to attack the problems that they faced from brainstorming to moving directly to a Freshman Academy where a separate school within a school is designated specifically for ninth graders beginning their high school experience. Some groups found immediate success while others found themselves having to back track and change the focus of their efforts taking a new approach toward their goals. Such differences had a great deal to do with outside forces that were social and economic. Thus, the amount of social and economic issues each school faced differed and it appears that this factor may have had an impact on the ease in which transition programs were implemented more effectively and timely.

A tendency for leader groups to emerge became clear. Leader groups were those that tried a model from outside of the region in their initiative such as the Johns-Hopkins model for teaching Freshman Seminar. The non-leader groups have used the consortium to connect with these leader groups and adopt similar programs for their initiatives. As a result, the researcher

noticed a similar “toolbox” of initiatives for attacking transition issues by the majority of the schools studied. The aforementioned toolbox was generally comprised of a great many tools consistent with recommendations from Hertzog and Morgan’s research (Hertzog & Morgan 1998). The multiple tools were employed in the effort to ease transition for students. This toolbox included move up days at the end of the school year, summer time orientations, Freshman Seminar classes, credit recovery programs, attendance incentive programs, a focus on career education, mentoring programs, and freshman grouping.

In the interviews conducted, the researcher heard little in the way of size being a strong suit or a barrier of any kind except in the district in Case # 9. Size was a major factor in that group moving to a Freshman Academy. While size was noted once in the interviews as a major factor in transition, the literature review supported the idea that large schools have a greater challenge in terms of meeting transition needs for its students (Duke 1999).

Concerning the way that the Middle-High groups work within the network of the Consortium of Public Education, the opportunity to network was a major factor in terms of what group leaders saw as a benefit. Groups did not have to re-invent the wheel and districts that are currently experiencing economic difficulty did not need to pay an outside consultant. Rather, these groups could use each other to gain knowledge and expertise on initiatives and tools for bringing about a smoother transition for their students. As a result of the exchange of ideas, it is likely that the “toolboxes” mentioned above look alike for this reason.

The time that groups had to work with one another was a key factor as well in terms of what groups felt was a valuable asset working within the constructs of the Middle-High Initiative. Time set aside that is dedicated to anything other than daily problem-solving, teaching, and academic planning is extremely scarce in school districts. The team leaders

interviewed appreciated the time afforded during meeting days in the Middle-High Initiative and found this time to focus on their own district transition initiatives extremely valuable.

The experience of districts joining a learning community (Dufour et al 2004) that enables them to identify issues that they are facing is a key piece of this research. The learning community involves more than educators discussing problems in their district. Rather, the process under the learning community that is the Middle-High Initiative involves using data to journey beyond what staff and administration may identify as problems and offering reasons why the problems exist. Educators are enabled to transform into school improvement agents armed with researched and thoughtfully crafted solutions to meet the needs of their districts. The model of the Middle-High Initiative offers time and structure to move through a process that allows groups to research the issues that their districts face and follow up with researching how the problems may be solved. Time is given to embark upon initiatives to be implemented complete with organized goals and timetables. What is more, the Middle-High Initiative provides successful models for groups to learn from which have been introduced from the outside or within the Initiative network system itself. Groups observe success from their peers and realize that they too can accomplish the same goals. Finally, the Middle-High Initiative offers scholarly research to which group members may not have easy access and consulting from Middle-High staff that helps point out anticipated difficulties and ways to maneuver around these difficulties.

It is evident that a smooth transition from eighth to ninth grade is crucial to a student's success in high school both on a national level and in the more concentrated area of Southwestern Pennsylvania supported by (Bushaw, 2007; Cauley & Jovanavich, 2006; Gerwitz, 2007; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Queen, 2002; Reents, 2002; Rice, 2001; Schiller, 1999). The Middle-High Initiative has been in place for three years and has assisted

schools located within Southwestern Pennsylvania in creating transition programs for districts mainly, but not exclusively from middle school to high school. The research contained in this dissertation gives Middle-High staff-members insight into the mindset of their group members and illustrates the resources provided by the Middle-High Initiative that member groups feel is most valuable. Additionally, this type of information assists staff members in providing a strong structure for Middle-High groups to work within and valuable resources to use with the end result of easing transition for ninth graders. Easing transition creates a healthier and more productive ninth-grade experience that leads to more successful years following the ninth-grade year.

The team leaders interviewed feel membership in the Middle-High Initiative is a valuable experience that has led to beneficial initiatives for their districts. The Middle-High groups found value in Middle-High consultants who are able to aid in the goal setting and execution of proposed initiatives identified by member districts. The consultants can help on various levels. They help organize the process by mandating that teams map their plans out physically and visibly using pencil and paper or computer spreadsheet. They also require that teams set goals with timetables. Consultants can offer sage advice in terms of the identification of the pitfalls that teams may encounter and where to find data and research that lend greater credibility to the goals of a given initiative. Additionally, consultants can open up avenues for groups to find money to help implement their initiatives.

Ninth grade academies appeared to give students the best advantage in dealing with transition from middle school to high school. Academies continue the middle school concept that gives students a greater identity with the school and with those around them. Identity and connectedness is crucial in one's young adult and even adult life as supported by Queen (2002).

This sense of identity as a member of a team of students with teachers who know them on a more personal level may be the most key ingredient to successful transition. Unfortunately, my personal experience with too many colleagues in the secondary teaching profession is a balking at extending middle school teaming practice into the higher grade levels. Contrary to these thoughts of resistance, it is the researchers opinion that the teaming concept is going to become a large factor in the future of secondary and even post-secondary education.

Another factor that the researcher deems positive relating to transition is the proximity of the middle school to the high school. The research gives positive feedback in regards to having both schools on the same campus with teachers who cross over to work with both high school and middle school kids. The use of the same facilities in the campus scenario like auditoriums, gymnasiums, band facilities, and even public address systems act to give students an inadvertent orientation to high school with a smoother transition as a by-product.

Additionally, the researcher feels it is apparent from the study that working in a professional learning community has a great deal of value for educators. Sharing knowledge and experiences in an organized and professional environment can help lead to initiatives that improve student achievement along with their overall experience in the public school setting.

The data from this study indicates that transition from eighth to ninth grade is a critical time in the lives of young people and that efforts to ease transition pay dividends. Educators are working in an era of accountability. Public money that is spent must be spent wisely. Many are questioning the value of public schools as they are currently operating. The governors of New Jersey, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania have cut or are proposing to cut spending on education. Many of the districts in this study are considered distressed. As districts are facing

budget cuts many face building issues like renovation of existing structures or the prospect of having to build a new structure.

The aforementioned is precisely why transition programs are so important. Such programs are a wise use of resources because they help create successful high school students that graduate.

In addition, this dissertation indicates that schools districts working within a larger collegial group like the Middle-High Initiative proves to be a wise use of resources. The evidence can be found in the fact that group members attest to using each other as a resource and therefore do not have to reinvent the wheel on issues of transition. The Middle-High Initiative acts as a resource network nested within a close geographic area where group members can rely on the expertise of fellow colleagues and the consultants within the forum rather than having to go alone in their efforts. Working within the Middle-High Initiative saves group members from having to pay outside consultants to help with issues of transition or use time and money on conducting research on the topic.

In summary, the mission of the Middle-High Initiative is to create an environment where districts are able to focus on easing transition from middle school to high school. The efforts in easing transition focus on decreasing dropout rates and improving the academic and social wellbeing of high school students. It is clear from this research that member groups felt this goal is being reached within their districts. Evidence of this assertion is offered in improved attendance, decreased drop out rates, and improved academic achievement by measure of grades. This research also emphasizes the need for professional development and networking groups like the Middle-High Initiative within the field of education.

5.4 POSSIBILITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are areas in which this study could be expanded. One way is to broaden the number of schools involved in the study. Accuracy in research is likely to improve when more subjects are studied. In this case, the subjects would be more school district teams. Another way that the research could be expanded is to involve the input of students in hopes of learning more about the effect that transition initiatives have had in their academic lives.

Further research could focus on more quantitative data with the main thrust being PSSA test results as these tests have become a major focus for schools throughout Pennsylvania. A longitudinal study of districts that have implemented transition programs with baseline achievement data and a subsequent following of the progress of groups of children would be of great interest.

Building on the idea of a longitudinal study, of interest would be comparing test groups that have certain elements in their transition programs with control groups where such elements are absent. A sample query could seek to find out if schools that have a Freshman Academy are more successful than those that do not have a Freshman Academy.

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