

Analysis of a Stand Alone Ninth Grade School Transition Program Model: 1993-2003

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## **Abstract**

The transition from middle school to high school is a crucial period as adolescents frequently have a difficult time acclimating to the high school environment and often experience a decline in their academic achievement from middle school to ninth grade (DeLamar & Brown, 2016; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Fulk, 2003; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Neild, 2009). Many students who drop out of school do so in ninth grade and do not graduate on time with their classmates (Asplough, 1998; Bottoms, 2002; Fulk, 2003; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). The components of a successful middle school to high school transition program address the academic, procedural, and social challenges students face during this time (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000; Block, 2016; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ellerbrock, Denmon, & Owens, 2015; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006).

Richard Samuel School (RSS), a stand-alone ninth-grade center, has addressed transition challenges for over 25 years. The focus in this single case study research was on the reasons for development of this unique school configuration, as well as the programmatic structures created to address students' academic, procedural, and social concerns, through the perceptions of former students, staff, and administrators. An additional focus was to identify the effectiveness, benefits, and drawbacks of the program design that addressed the middle school to high school transition for all students at RSS. The analysis covered the program during the first 10 years of its existence, from its inception in 1993 until 2003.

Results of this study reflected themes around responsive and supportive accountability among staff and students. Through transition structures, such as the development of a school support team and core content teachers planning for and teaching advanced and standard level curriculum coupled with student placement on an interdisciplinary team and every student assigned a teacher advisor, students at RSS experienced a positive transition to high school. As a result, a decline in student retention occurred and after year three of implementation, there was a 0% dropout rate. The results of this case study contribute to the research regarding impactful transition programming from middle school to high school.

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## **General Audience Abstract**

The movement from middle school to high school is a crucial period as students frequently have a difficult time adjusting to the high school environment and often experience a decline in their grades once they leave middle school and enter ninth grade (DeLamar & Brown, 2016; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Fulk, 2003; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Neild, 2009). Many students who drop out of school do so in ninth grade and do not graduate on time with their classmates (Asplough, 1998; Bottoms, 2002; Fulk, 2003; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). The transition from middle school to high school involves communication between school personnel, students, and their parents to ensure it is successful. The components of a successful middle school to high school transition program address the academic, procedural, and social challenges students face during this time (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000; Block, 2016; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ellerbrock, Denmon, & Owens, 2015; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006).

Richard Samuel School (RSS), a stand-alone ninth-grade center, has addressed transition challenges for over 25 years. The focus in this single case study research was to examine the reasons for the development of this unique school configuration, as well as the programmatic structures created to address students' academic, procedural, and social concerns, through the perceptions of former students, staff, and administrators. An additional focus was to identify the effectiveness, benefits, and drawbacks of the program design which addressed the middle school to high school transition for all students at

RSS. The study covered the program during the first 10 years of its existence, from its inception in 1993 until 2003. The results of this study contribute to the research regarding impactful transition programming from middle school to high school.

## **DEDICATION**

To my incredibly patient, supportive, and loving family. Martin, thank you for encouraging me to take on this challenge and always being there to run an idea by you. You were always willing to read a new part of my writing and to serve as my impromptu editor. I could not have done this without your support!

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Last, to my Auntie . . . We had many conversations of late and you were always so interested in my work and what I was writing about. You left just a few months too soon to celebrate my accomplishment. I know that you are looking through the heavens now with so much pride. I did it!

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

The format of this dissertation follows the guidelines for a manuscript dissertation as designed by Virginia Tech. A manuscript dissertation is similar to the standard dissertation format as it comprises five chapters. However, the organization of Chapters 3 and 4 vary, as each of these chapters contains a different manuscript.

The format for this dissertation is as follows: Chapter 1 contains the introduction and literature review, Chapter 2 contains the methodology, Chapter 3 contains a manuscript intended for publication in an academic journal, Chapter 4 contains a manuscript intended for publication in an educational practitioner journal, and Chapter 5 contains the conclusion. The references for each manuscript are included at the end of their respective chapters, with a compiled reference list at the end of the dissertation, along with the appendices used during the research process.

### **Background**

Transitioning from one school or grade level to another can be challenging for school-aged children. Leaving middle school to enter high school can elicit all types of emotions and cause students to experience different levels of anxiety, as it signifies an important next step for students in their school trajectory. Students frequently have difficulty acclimating to the high school environment, including often receiving lower grades in high school than in previous years (DeLamar & Brown, 2016; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Fulk, 2003; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Neild, 2009).

In order to graduate within 4 years, students must navigate these new expectations successfully. In particular, students must adjust quickly to the increased academic rigor of high school (Neild, 2009; Roderick, 2003). Students retained in ninth grade usually

fail to graduate on time with their cohort of grade-level peers (Bottoms, 2002; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Fulk, 2003; Neild, 2009; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008) and face an increased risk of dropping out of school (Alspaugh, 1998; Bottoms, 2002; Fulk, 2003; Neild et al., 2008).

Non-academic factors also complicate the transition to ninth grade. Adolescent development brings a variety of other changes for students, including puberty, new cognitive capabilities, changes in peer relationships, and a desire to make new friends (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006). Social factors also bring new pressures to ninth graders. Many students want to participate in extracurricular activities, such as joining an athletic team, theater program, or an afterschool club. These activities consume significant amounts of time and can both ease and complicate the process of acclimating to a new school culture with many more students and unfamiliar teachers (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Potter, Schliskey, Stevenson, & Drawdy, 2001).

Donohue and Zigmond (1990) pointed out the following challenges faced by ninth graders during the eighth to ninth grade transition:

In ninth grade, for the first time, students must earn passing grades in core courses that carry credits required for graduation. At the same time, ninth grade students are faced with increased demands both in terms of independent study skills, and in the amount of content covered in each class. Some students who are at risk for failure may have advanced through earlier grades due to individual teacher attention and vigilant monitoring that may not be possible or desirable within the larger secondary school culture. (p. 9)

Schools cannot treat transitioning from middle school to high school as an isolated event. Schiller (1999) contended that school transitions involve “a process during which institutional and social factors influence which students’ educational careers are positively or negatively affected by this movement between organizations” (pp. 216-217). Consequently, school leaders must design a systematic process that unfolds over time and includes a variety experiences across school levels (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Impactful transition programming must be intentional and address attendance, academic progress, and retention (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Otherwise, schools risk not acclimating students properly to the increased rigor and expectations of the high school environment, which may exacerbate the difficulties related to the transition.

The configuration of the school contributes to the ease or difficulty of the ninth-grade transition. Some comprehensive high schools separate ninth graders into “academies” or identify a section of the building as the ninth-grade “house.” Such a grouping enables the ninth-graders to remain, as much as possible, in a section of the school with their grade-level peers (Neild et al., 2008). Some high schools configure the school to include the concept of teaming when students enter ninth grade. Teaming, a common practice in middle schools, involves keeping teams of students grouped with common content teachers. The team approach allows students to develop stronger relationships with peers and teachers and provides opportunities for teachers to create cross-curricular lesson plans (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000).

The school cannot operate its transition program in isolation. Successful transition programming from middle to high school involves all stakeholders, including middle school and high school educators, students, and parents or guardians.

Relationships with caring adults in school matter when developing and implementing impactful transition programming from middle school to high school. Impactful programming must guarantee that academic, procedural, and social concerns are intentionally addressed in order for students to successfully change and adapt to their new learning environment (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Studies have shown a decrease in failure and dropout rates when both school environments work together to embed vertically articulated transition programs (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999).

For this dissertation, I examined a ninth-grade transition program that shares features with academies and teaming, but differs from them because the subject district housed the ninth-grade students at a location physically separated from the rest of the high school. The Small Suburban Public Schools (SSPS), a mid-Atlantic school district, designated a stand-alone building to house all of its ninth-grade students, which provided an opportunity to frame the educational programming with intentionality in its design. Leaders of the SSPS district wanted “to address the academic and social inequities, as well as the procedural challenges” facing students entering high school (M. Wrenn, personal communication, November 4, 2017).

Richard Samuel School (RSS) opened in 1993 with 702 ninth-grade students and 61 teachers. The incoming students came from two different middle schools and were scheduled into one of five interdisciplinary teams. The teams generally provided students with the same options, including both standard and advanced curricular options. Students also participated in an advisory period twice a week. In 1995, a sixth team, referred to as the “S” team, was added. In doing so, all teams were referred to by a letter of the

school's name, S-A-M-U-E-L. However, the "S" team differed from the other teams because school staff placed students who were at-risk academically and behaviorally and who had poor attendance in eighth grade on that team. The school staffed the "S" team with additional resources (e.g., a dedicated guidance counselor and social worker) to address their varying social-emotional needs. The "S" team students attended smaller classes in order for the school to support issues such as attendance, conflict mediation, and substance abuse issues, and to connect students with community resources (M. Wrenn, personal communication, November 4, 2017).

The design principles of Richard Samuel School provided a unique ninth-grade transition option. District leaders hoped this design, often described as "effectiveness by design," would increase student achievement by personalizing the education for ninth grade students in order to help them overcome the academic, social, and procedural challenges presented by the middle school to high school transition (M. Wrenn, personal communication, November 4, 2017).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research demonstrates that ninth grade can be difficult for students because it coincides with increased independence and peer influence, along with decreased parent supervision (Neild, 2009). Students usually attend a new school, leaving behind bonds with teachers and peers. Many students enter ninth grade unprepared for the academic rigor of high school, which becomes a major source of difficulty (Neild, 2009).

The Southern Regional Education Board (Bottoms, 2002) emphasized the need for intentional and impactful programming to address concerns related to the ninth-grade

transition. Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) summarized the following concerns of teachers and administrators:

More students fail ninth grade than any other grade of school; poor and minority students are twice as likely as others to be retained; and among fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds who struggle with basic reading and mathematics 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. (p. 15)

As discussed above, the manner in which high schools configure the school to support the incoming ninth-grade students makes a difference in how well students navigate the transition. Research shows programs dedicated to supporting the student transition directly relate to a decrease in ninth-grade student retention and fewer behavior and attendance concerns (Duke, Bourdeaux, Epps, & Wilcox, 1998; Erickson, Peterson, & Lembeck, 2013b). “One of the most compelling reasons for focusing on ninth grade is the evidence that getting off track [for graduation] at that point has negative long-term educational consequences” (Neild, 2009, p. 55).

### **Need for the Study**

A variety of transition designs have been implemented successfully in schools. Transition programs are not one-size-fits-all models, but must be tailored to the needs of the students and the school district. Richard Samuel School, with its ninth-grade center, offers a novel approach to the ninth-grade transition as the district placed all of its ninth-grade students on a campus physically separated from the high school by two city blocks.

The unique approach used at Richard Samuel School offers another means of helping students transition to high school. School leaders developed and implemented targeted programs, such as intentional freshman orientation activities, and created ninth-grade teams with teacher advisories designed to increase student achievement, improve attendance rates, and decrease student retention rates (M. Wrenn, personal communication, November 4, 2017). This study of the model used at Richard Samuel School adds to the literature regarding transition programs through an analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of creating a school that only houses ninth-grade students and offers another option to districts seeking to improve their transition programs.

### **Research Questions**

To analyze the transition program at Richard Samuel School, I developed the following research questions:

1. What were the reasons for the development of Richard Samuel School's ninth-grade transition program?
  - a. What structures were in place to address the academic concerns of students when transitioning from middle school to high school?
  - b. What structures were in place to address the procedural concerns of students when transitioning from middle school to high school?
  - c. What structures were in place to address the social concerns of students when transitioning from middle school to high school?
2. What changes between 1993 and 2003 occurred at Richard Samuel School to meet the needs of students and staff?
  - a. Why did these changes occur?

- b. Did the changes accomplish the objectives underlying their implementation?
3. What were the perceptions of former students, staff, and administrators regarding the effectiveness of Richard Samuel School's ninth-grade program?
- a. What were the benefits of the Richard Samuel School's ninth-grade transition program?
  - b. What were the drawbacks of Richard Samuel School's ninth-grade transition program?

I answered the research questions by examining data from interviews with key stakeholders, such as the former superintendent of SSPS at the time of the design of the school, former administrator for the first 9 years of RSS and former administrator of the high school, and a former teacher at RSS. Additionally, I interviewed two former students. Interview questions contained a focus on the ways in which the school leadership team monitored scholastic achievement, attendance, and behavior to increase graduation rates.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are used throughout the research study and are defined as follows:

*Academy* – a separation of students by grade level in a comprehensive high school (Neild, 2009).

*Adolescent* – “the period of physical and psychological development from the onset of puberty to maturity” (The American Heritage Desk Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2005, p. 12).

*Cohort* – “group of students who enter the ninth grade for the first time together with the expectation of graduating within four years” (Virginia Department of Education, 2018).

*Collaboration* – “to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort” (The American Heritage Desk Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2005, p. 146).

*Community of care* – “a school culture in which students and teachers care about and support each other, individuals’ needs are satisfied within a group setting, and members feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group” (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014, p. 3).

*Dropout* – refers to a student who “has left the school district with no reason given for departure, whose status is unknown” (Neild et al., 2008).

*House* – students grouped by grade level in a designated section of a school (Neild, 2009).

*Ninth grade* – marks the beginning of the high school years and a time that introduces students to a new set of academic expectations and course credits toward graduation (Neild, 2009).

*Teams* – students grouped with common content teachers.

*Transition* – “refers to students moving from one school to another between Grades 8 and 9” (Block, 2016, p. 17).

### **Literature Review**

This literature review covers the three main areas that challenge students when transitioning from eighth to ninth grade: academic, procedural, and social issues (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000; Cauley & Jovanovich,

2006; Ellerbrock, Denmon, & Owens, 2015; Smith et al., 2006). Next, the review covers the components and qualities of successful transition programs. Finally, I present two model programs as examples of current ninth-grade transition programs that illustrate different ways schools can support students during this critical time.

### **Challenges Faced by Students Transitioning to High School**

The challenges students experience during the transition from middle to high school can be categorized into three areas: academic, procedural, and social concerns (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderson et al., 2000; Block, 2016; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2006). Academic concerns include the need for students and their parents to understand the high school academic program, including an increase in rigorous expectations, homework, earning course credits, and grading systems (Donohue & Zigmond, 1990). Procedural challenges arise as students adjust to their new environment and involve understanding their daily course schedule, how to select new courses, and bell schedules (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cushman, 2006). Students may experience anxiety regarding having enough time to travel from class to class, how to open their locker, and when or with whom they will be eating lunch on any given day. Social issues include making friends, participating in extracurricular activities and sports, and addressing bullies (Potter et al., 2001).

The specific academic, procedural, and social challenges are unique to each student, but typically revolve around certain commonalities that can be connected to all students. Transitions between educational levels affect virtually all students in some way (Anderson et al., 2000; Schiller, 1999). Students going through the developmental stage of puberty often experience “decreased motivation, lowered self-esteem, and increased

psychological distress” (Akos & Galassi, 2004, p. 212). During the first months of moving to high school, many students experience declines in their grades and academic achievement (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 1998; Anderson et al., 2000; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Other students feel less school satisfaction, demonstrate a less positive attitude toward school work, and experience decreases in their self-efficacy and self-esteem (Anderson et al., 2000).

**Academic challenges.** Students face increased academic demands when they enter high school. They must earn course credits toward graduation by passing their classes (Neild, 2009) and end-of-course standardized assessments in core content areas. Students who fail courses can fall off track to graduation (Alspaugh, 1998; Fulk, 2003; Neild, 2009). Students realize the importance of their grades and the need to stay on top of their work (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Other concerns facing rising ninth-grade students include their readiness for the rigor of high school courses and the increased expectations of their teachers. As such, often students who struggle see their grades drop during ninth grade (Alspaugh, 1998; Seidman, Allen, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994; Smith, 2006).

Students face other academic challenges upon entering ninth grade. Such challenges include how to calculate grades and credits, who to contact about their course schedule and other academic aspects of their new school, and how to manage the increased amount of homework (Akos & Galassi, 2004; DeLamar & Brown, 2016; Frasier, 2007). Many students report feeling they did not establish as supportive of relationships with their high school teachers when compared to their relationships with middle school teachers (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Block, 2016; Hauser, Choate, & Thomas, 2009; Smith, Akos, Lim, & Wiley, 2008; Smith et al., 2006).

**Procedural challenges.** Both middle and high school students interact with various teachers throughout the school day. Most students gain experience with changing classes and having multiple teachers in middle school. However, a new, typically larger school environment at the high school level may present challenges for students entering ninth grade. In addition, most middle school students take the same classes, whereas high school students take a far greater variety of courses. In many cases, the learning environment becomes less personalized and more competitive (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Some examples of procedural challenges include learning high school rules, managing higher academic and social expectations, worrying about how to successfully open their locker, and getting to class on time (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Block, 2016; Cushman, 2006; DeLamar & Brown, 2016; Frasier, 2007; Haviland, 2005; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Neild, 2009).

**Social challenges.** Social challenges for students entering ninth grade include concerns about making new friends and how to interact with older students and bullies (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Block, 2016; DeLamar & Brown, 2016; Frasier, 2007). Students entering high school gain many new opportunities, such as playing sports, joining clubs, making new friends, and developing independence (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Letrello & Miles, 2003). However, as new friends are made, students risk losing long-term friendships. Additionally, participation in sports, social activities, and developing independence require students to acquire new skills. As a result of their broadened social circle, students experience more peer pressure, older students, and an increased possibility of being bullied (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Block, 2016; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Smith et al., 2006; Weiss & Bearman, 2007).

These social challenges coincide with adolescent development in which peer relationships are paramount (Langenkamp, 2010). Block (2016) examined teacher perceptions of the student transition to high school that confirmed the social challenges students faced as a result of moving to a larger campus. Students are concerned with their image and fitting in with their peers and often experience a disconnect from their long term friends and family members (p. 118). Langenkamp (2010) contended that “social relationships with peers may be even more powerful than bonds with teachers in predicting how students fare academically in the transition to high school, because cohorts of students typically move through the school system together” (p. 3).

**Negative outcomes.** Students who enter ninth grade with academic and social challenges confront a higher risk of attendance problems, behavioral issues, and dropping out of high school (DeLamar & Brown, 2016). Students from underserved backgrounds face an increased risk of experiencing these problems. Similarly, students with special needs face a higher risk of dropping out. More than 25% of special education students drop out of school during their first years of high school (Frasier, 2007). Roderick (2003) found a central theme:

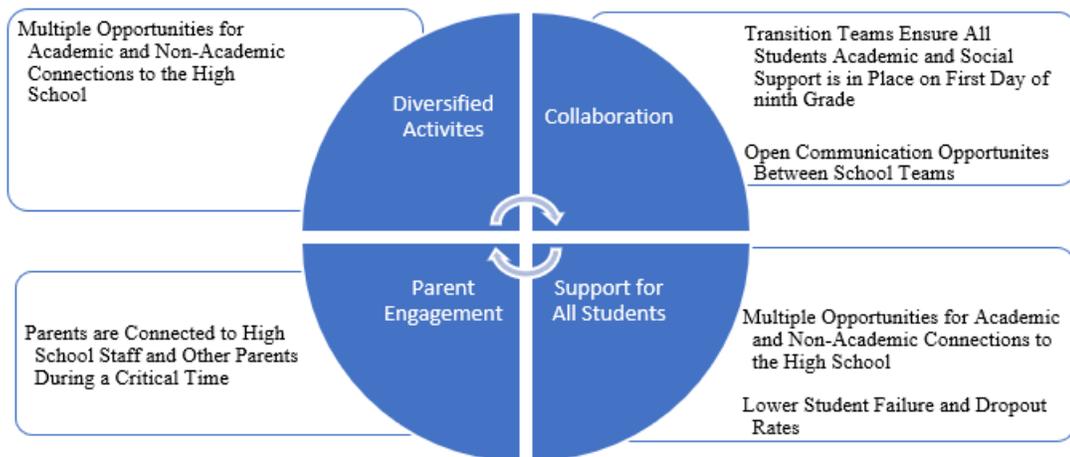
The traditional large anonymous urban high school with its uneven quality, disconnected programming, and lack of attention to guidance and student development is simply not up to the task of promoting high levels of engagement and achievement for minority adolescents in urban communities. (p. 580)

### **Components and Benefits of Successful Transition Programs**

Students who participate in transition programs at the end of eighth grade adjust more successfully to ninth grade (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ellerbrock & Keifer,

2014; Neild, 2009). Educational professionals can provide opportunities for students to participate in transition activities and create a dedicated program within schools to support the adjustment and enhance students' experience, thus achieving positive outcomes (Anderson et al., 2000; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998). Districts and schools with such programs tend to have lower dropout rates (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Smith, 2006).

The components of successful transition programs include diversified activities for students and parents, collaboration between middle school and high school staff, support for all students, and opportunities for increased parent engagement. These components are shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Components and benefits of successful middle school to high school transitions.

Impactful transition programming addresses a wide variety of topics, including curriculum, facilities, safety, discipline, and the structural organization of the high school (Smith, 2006). Incoming students and families can participate in a variety of activities that allow for increased interaction with their new school. Examples of such activities

include registering for high school courses and attending school and principal introduction programs (that may also include high school visits and meeting with an upperclassmen panel, student shadowing, and visiting ninth-grade classrooms; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Letrello & Miles, 2003), and opportunities to provide families with “curricular and logistic information as well as resources for academic and social support” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 10).

Transition programs offer numerous, far-reaching benefits. They include multiple academic and nonacademic opportunities for connections for students and families. Impactful programs that support ninth graders increase the scaffolding provided for students struggling academically or socially (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998). Successful transition programs ensure every rising ninth-grade student meets a teacher, counselor, or administrator at the new high school prior to the start of ninth grade. When students can identify a supportive adult at their new school, their academic performance, confidence, and comfort level with the transition increase (DeLamar & Brown, 2016; Ellerbrock & Keifer, 2014; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

**Diversified activities.** Impactful transition programming improves student attendance, academic progress, and grade promotion by providing diversified activities and support for students (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; DeLamar & Brown, 2016). Transition programs with diversified activities provide multiple opportunities for students and their families to make a connection to ninth grade prior to and during the school year. These activities increase students’ abilities to make connections that are both social and academic in nature in their new school. Such opportunities may include early introductions to a counselor or teacher who will be available for support at the new

school, ninth-grade student panels, high school principal talks, or having a high school student mentor an incoming ninth-grader (Erickson et al., 2013b; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Letrello & Miles, 2003).

Summer bridge programs housed in the new school provide another way for students to make early connections to high school. A summer bridge program “provides incoming ninth-grade students with enriching summer activities that give academic support, advancement, and motivation to excel in high school through career-related field trips and other relevant activities” (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 5). Programs can range from a 1-day event to a 1-week (or longer) experience for students and can provide supports and enrichment experiences for success in the upcoming school year (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, Erickson, Peterson, & Lembeck, 2013a). Bridge programs strengthen core academic skills and teach soft skills such as notetaking, organization, and time management while helping rising ninth graders learn how to navigate their new building. Additionally, summer programming provides opportunities to create positive relationships with staff and peers before the school year begins (Neild, 2009).

Diversified activities within transition programs allow for students and families to make connections with teachers and staff regarding opportunities available to incoming students. When school teams engage parents through partnership activities, significant improvement in student success can occur (Mac Iver, Epstein, Sheldon, & Fonseca, 2015; Mac Iver & Simmons, 2017).

**Collaboration between middle school and high school staff.** Students experience smoother transitions when middle and high school staff implement these components using a team approach and targeted supports to address students’ academic,

procedural, and social challenges. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014) confirmed the value of middle and high school collaboration among staff to implement a positive student transition and highlighted a smaller learning community approach within a large high school, referred to as a *community of care*. Students desire caring teachers who are willing to work with them as individuals (Steinburg & McCray, 2012). “The development of positive teacher beliefs about students, supportive teacher-student relationships, and the promotion of academic and life skills may help create a caring community in which the students are the primary receivers of care” (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010).

The development of a successful transition team must include both middle and high school teachers, counselors, social workers, and administrators. These professionals develop and ensure a mutual understanding of respective programs, courses, and requirements (Anderson et al., 2000; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998). Teachers need to be “developmentally responsive” to students’ needs (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014) and “knowledgeable and sensitive to potential roadblocks for students [and their parents]” (Akos & Galassi, 2004, p. 213). Key stakeholders from both levels promote collaboration between middle school and high school staff and provide increased opportunities to align processes and programs to support the matriculation to ninth grade and to ensure greater opportunity for success (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998).

Transition teams that include high school and middle school staff and collaborate on addressing distinctive procedural or organizational differences between the schools to plan for a smooth transition for students (Smith, 2006). Educators at both levels accept the mutual responsibility of understanding the curriculum requirements in order to

prepare and support student learners. These relationships enable school leaders and staff to communicate with students about the differences prior to students' arrival to the high school campus, which facilitates both building a successful transition program and academic success (Langenkamp, 2010). Eventually, the high school counselor serves as the conduit and point of contact for designing an individual plan for support and information dissemination to both students and their parents (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

The partnership between high schools and middle schools assists with program development to address myriad student needs. Teams meet throughout the school year, creating timely programs such as student advisement sessions or student shadowing experiences that provide opportunities for school staff to implement inclusive programs that positively affect student experiences and graduation (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Erickson et al., 2013a).

The collaboration between middle school and high school educators of student data (e.g., academic, discipline, and attendance) allows for the development of individual education plans for all students. The ability to design targeted programming to support ninth graders with academic or social deficiencies before they enter the doors of ninth grade is beneficial to students. Through the implementation of targeted support programming, students' stress and anxiety during the transition can be reduced, thus lowering the retention and dropout rates in the long term (Erickson et al., 2013b; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998).

Middle school and high school leaders can cooperate to help ease the academic component of the transition. Middle school teachers provide scaffolding for their students by providing intentional instruction regarding the study and organizational skills

needed to meet high school expectations (Bausch & Becker, 2001; Fulk, 2003). High school teams, in collaboration with middle school teams, can use student data regarding academic deficiencies in middle school to support early intervention programs in ninth grade to address the increased academic rigor and need for effective study and organizational skills (Erickson et al., 2013b).

**Support for all students.** School leaders prepare all students for the transition by using student achievement data to determine areas of need and taking a proactive role in developing a plan to address any deficiencies (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). The transition team can create targeted support that ensures all students receive some level of support as they enter ninth grade. Social ties with teachers change between middle school and high school, so new ties need to be created and fostered with caring staff in the new school setting (Langenkamp, 2010; Steinburg & McCray, 2012).

The high level of attention given to ninth-grade students is an important component of successful transition programs. New ninth-grade students expect this level of attention because middle schools typically assign students to teams, which creates a naturally supportive environment. In addition to what happens in the classroom, “helping students [develop] a sense of belonging means getting students involved in [co-curricular or extra-curricular] activities, either directly (as participants) or indirectly (as spectators)” (Anderson et al., 2000, p. 336).

Targeted programming to support all students includes an orientation to high school, information about sports teams and other extracurricular activities, a school tour, and individualized academic counseling when creating a course schedule. Many schools implement an advisory period that allows for personalized attention and a closer

relationship with an adult in the school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; M. Wrenn, personal communication, November 4, 2017).

Four factors must be considered when developing targeted support for a successful transition program: gender, prior disciplinary behavior, low academic achievement, and socioeconomic status (Anderson et al., 2000). Girls tend to be affected more than boys by the developmental changes during adolescence, particularly with developing and maintaining friendships (Anderson et al., 2000; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997). Students with behavioral issues during middle school often experience difficulties with the transition for many reasons, including below level academic skills, poor attendance, or a lack of parental involvement (Baker & Stephenson, 1986; Roderick, 2003). Students with academic deficiencies upon entering high school tend to struggle with the increased academic rigor and change of environment. Finally, students from families with low socioeconomic status often lack the parental support structures to ensure a successful transition (Anderson et al., 2000).

**Parent engagement.** Outreach to parents, specifically, plays a critical role in ensuring a successful transition for students. The middle schools and the high school need to encourage a partnership with parents. Parental participation in the transition process produces a strong effect on student success in ninth grade (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Hattie (2012) claimed that the influence of the home environment has a 0.52 effect size on student achievement, indicating that creating strong partnerships with parents during this time strongly affects whether a successful transition occurs. The actions of teachers, principals, and other staff influence parent engagement, which should be a priority for transition teams (Erickson et al., 2013b; Mac Iver et al., 2015). Targeted

outreach to parents regarding student progress, attendance, and upcoming events supports the school and benefits student achievement.

Parents and schools must partner in the education of students. The transition team should include responsive and supportive accountability of all stakeholders, including parents (M. Wrenn, personal communication, November 4, 2017). Communication and the involvement of parents provide an added benefit as students enter high school, in contrast to the manner in which parental involvement typically wanes after elementary school.

Parents and family play a critical role in supporting adolescents during the transition to high school. “When schools do reach out to engage parents, there is evidence that parents respond and become engaged” (Mac Iver et al., 2015, p. 29). “Parental support and encouragement have been linked to students’ perceptions of themselves as learners, increased motivation to do their best in school, and measured student achievement” (Mac Iver et al., 2015, p. 30).

School leaders must pay careful attention to connecting with the families of at-risk students. Students struggling academically usually do not have parental support at home (Baker & Stephenson, 1986). Research shows that the higher the socioeconomic status of a family, the more likely that parents possess knowledge of their child’s academic status. If their student struggles at school, parents generally know about the situation and who to contact at the school to address it (Baker & Stephenson, 1986).

## **Examples of Successful Transition Programs**

In this section, two transition programs are discussed that research has shown to be successful. The first of these programs is called “Freshman Focus.” The second program is named “On the Block.”

**Freshman Focus.** Popadiuk and Oliver (2011) argued that a transition program should contain a focus on developing caring, mutual, and respectful relationships between students and teachers. They stated students who believed teachers cared about them reported a more positive transition experience. Popadiuk and Oliver concluded that with a foundation of caring relationships, students experience greater opportunities for growth and success during the transition into high school and beyond.

Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014) conducted research on a “Freshman Focus” program and identified five aspects that were necessary for the support students received and the development of teacher–student relationships: “recruiting developmentally responsive teachers, encouraging a sense of cohesiveness, providing opportunities for students to practice academic and life skills, promoting a lasting community of care beyond the conclusion of the course, and realizing the significance of one innovative program” (pp. 6-9). Equipping students with the academic and social skills they need increases the likelihood of a positive experience and success in high school. The Freshman Focus program provides a curriculum that can be implemented on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis, which provides a consistent structure across the school (Popadiuk & Oliver, 2011). Middle school and high school educator collaboration focused on addressing procedural, social, and academic challenges and attending to students’ developmental needs and

transition-related issues is responsive to the necessary support required for school success (Popadiuk & Oliver, 2011).

**On the Block.** Another program to support students, the “On the Block” (OTB) transition program, involves identifying at-risk middle school students (using 13 criteria for at-risk status) and providing a preview of high school. “An aim of the program is to help students build relationships with adults at the high school level” (DeLamar & Brown, 2016, p. 33). The OTB program provides students with the incentive of receiving one-half local credit if they participate in the 2-week program. Students are provided a preview of the curriculum and a review of procedures in their new school, such as the daily schedule and behavioral expectations. This opportunity allows them to be familiar with the high school environment before the first day of school. OTB also offers students the chance to meet teachers, staff, administrators, and other grade-level peers over the summer, which puts them at ease before the first day of ninth grade (DeLamar & Brown, 2016).

Though there is evidence to support that providing ninth-grade students with a variety of programming is beneficial, it is essential that educators design transition interventions with targeted structures for students who need additional support and are not on track for graduating with their cohort. The OTB program differs from Freshman Focus in that students are invited based on their below grade level academic standing and may benefit in a preview of high school with the goal that they will complete high school in 4 years (DeLamar & Brown, 2016).

In addition to OTB, middle school and high school transition teams should provide multiple supports to meet the varying needs students across school settings.

Researchers have demonstrated that targeted transition programs contribute to improved grade point averages with few or no failing grades of ninth-grade students (DeLamar & Brown, 2016). Students who are able to develop relationships with the educators in their new school through the supports of a structured transition program experience greater success in high school (Popadiuk & Oliver, 2011).

### **Summary**

In summary, the review of literature indicated the establishment of middle to high school transition teams that include students, parents, teachers, and other school staff creates an environment that allows for the development of impactful programs to meet the varying needs of students. Research supports that school transition teams should target ways to mitigate the academic, procedural, and social challenges students face when matriculating to high school to increase opportunities for student success. A concerted and collaborative effort in developing diversified activities that connect students from their middle school experience to the increased demands of high school, while also increasing opportunities for parent engagement, allows for myriad ways to support all students and lower student failure and dropout rates.

## **CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter contains details of the type of study conducted and the chosen methodology. It includes the purpose of the study, research questions, philosophical worldview, and an overview of the research design used to collect and analyze the data, including the units of analysis, as well as the trustworthiness of the research process. Additionally, it includes a synopsis of the background of each participant in this study. Finally, this chapter contains a review of researcher bias and the ethics of this research, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval process, confidentiality, and limitations and delimitations of the study.

### **Overview**

In the SSPS, a district in a mid-Atlantic state, a major reconfiguration of school structures occurred in the 1990s. For decades, the school district had three school structures: several elementary schools, consisting of Kindergarten through Grade 6; two junior high schools, consisting of Grades 7 through 9; and one high school, with Grades 10 through 12. In 1993, the district restructured its schools, including opening a ninthgrade center (Richard Samuel School) that addressed the freshman transition.

In this study, I examined the reasons behind the creation of the Richard Samuel School and the structures and processes implemented to address the academic, procedural, and social concerns students faced when moving from middle school to high school. The span of the study ran from the inception of the school in 1993 until 2003, shortly before I became principal at the school. I will share the results of this study with the school district, which may use them to determine any necessary programmatic changes or refinements.

## **Purpose of the Study**

In this case study, I examined the reasons for the development and implementation of Richard Samuel School, a stand-alone ninth-grade school in the SSPS in a mid-Atlantic state. The purpose of the study was to identify the effectiveness, benefits, and drawbacks of this school structure on the transition of ninth-grade students to high school. I explored the programmatic structures put in place to address students' academic, procedural, and social concerns through the perceptions of former students, staff, and administrators.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions focused on how the development and implementation of Richard Samuel School affected the transition of ninth-grade students. I used a single-case, qualitative case study methodology to understand the experiences and perceptions of students, staff, and administrators regarding the effectiveness of the programmatic structures put in place for ninth-grade students transitioning from middle school to ninth grade (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014).

The following research questions guided this analysis of the transition program at Richard Samuel School:

1. What were the reasons for the development of Richard Samuel School's ninth-grade transition program?
  - a. What structures were in place to address the academic concerns of students when transitioning from middle school to high school?
  - b. What structures were in place to address the procedural concerns of students when transitioning from middle school to high school?

- c. What structures were in place to address the social concerns of students when transitioning from middle school to high school?
2. What changes between 1993 and 2003 occurred at Richard Samuel School to meet the needs of students and staff?
  - a. Why did these changes occur?
  - b. Did the changes accomplish the objectives underlying their implementation?
3. What were the perceptions of former students, staff, and administrators regarding the effectiveness of Richard Samuel School's ninth-grade program?
  - a. What were the benefits of the Richard Samuel School's ninth-grade transition program?
  - b. What were the drawbacks of Richard Samuel School's ninth-grade transition program?

### **Philosophical Worldview**

Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated that “worldviews [are] a general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to the study” (p. 5). Constructivism is the most common type of worldview underlying qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers form meaning through interactions with others (Creswell, 2013), as “there are multiple realities or interpretations, of a single event” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). Researchers “recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation, and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8).

*Social constructivism* provides an interpretive framework through which individuals seek to understand the worlds of the participants and develop meanings that correspond to the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the social constructivist paradigm, “The goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). In order to gain perspective into the experiences of the participants, researchers generate questions that yield open-ended responses, so the researcher can construct the meaning of a situation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The questions elicit participants’ views and opinions, so the researcher can interpret the meanings others have about the worlds in which they live and work (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Through the interviews with school system leaders, teachers, and students, the evolution of the development and effectiveness of the stand-alone ninth grade school, along with the structures to support students, were explained. The interview process included semi-structured questions and allowed for varied perspectives and experiences to emerge in the analysis of Richard Samuel School from 1993 to 2003.

### **Research Design**

I used a qualitative case study approach to analyze the ninth-grade program at Richard Samuel School (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014). According to Mertler (2016), qualitative research “involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data, largely narrative and visual in nature, to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest” (p. 361). Yin (2014) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (‘the case’) within its

real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). Merriam (2002) asserted that “there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and that change over time. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding what those interpretations are at a particular point in time and in a particular context” (p. 4).

Creswell (2013) described case study research as a “qualitative approach in which the investigator explores real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) . . . over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (p. 97). Case studies are in-depth studies of specifically identified programs (Mertler, 2016), such as Richard Samuel School. “The researcher focuses on an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate the issue,” in a single case study design (Stake, 1995, p. 99). As Patton (2002) explained, case study research is descriptive in nature and paints a picture of or story about a program, making accessible the description, background and data to understand the uniqueness about the case.

In this single case study, I explored the transition to Richard Samuel School and described the phenomenon through a real-life context at Richard Samuel School (see Yin, 2014). I wanted to understand the reasons for the development of Richard Samuel School as a stand-alone ninth-grade school and how the program evolved and developed over the first 10 years of its existence, from 1993 to 2003. I explored the perceptions of former students, staff, and administrators regarding the effectiveness of this school structure at addressing the transition of students from middle school to high school. The focus was on how the transition program addressed students’ academic, procedural, and

social concerns. A case study method of analysis provided the most appropriate approach to explore the effectiveness of Richard Samuel School as a model transition program.

### **Setting**

Richard Samuel School provided the setting for this case study. The SSPS, a school system in a mid-Atlantic state, opened RSS as a stand-alone ninth-grade school in 1993. I examined the first 10 years of the implementation of this unique school configuration.

A brief discussion of the school structure changes in the SSPS will provide context for understanding the setting of this study. Prior to 1993, the SSPS used a junior high model, with students in Grades 7 through 9 attending one of two junior high schools. The students from both junior high schools attended Grades 10 through 12 at one high school in the school district. In 1993, SPSS created RSS, so the school district transitioned to a middle school model, with students in Grades 6 through 8 attending one of two middle schools, students in Grade 9 attending Richard Samuel School, and students in Grades 10 through 12 continuing to attend the high school.

From 1993 to 2003, the student enrollment at RSS remained steady, with approximately 825 ninth-grade students during those years. The demographic make-up of the school also changed very little during the timeframe of this study with over 35% White, over 25% Black, over 25% Hispanic, and 15% other. Approximately, 15% of the students received special education services, over 50% of the students were economically disadvantaged as defined by receiving free or reduced lunch, and 25% of the students were labeled as limited English proficient.

## **Participant Selection**

Mertler (2016) defined purposeful sampling as “sampling strategies that involve the intentional selection of individuals and sites to learn about or understand the topic at hand” (p. 361). Purposeful sampling assumes that the investigator must contact knowledgeable participants in order to understand the specific phenomena being studied, as opposed to random sampling used when the research concerns involve insights about population means (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I used purposeful sampling for the selection of the participants in this research study. The population for this study was former school system leaders, staff, and students of Richard Samuel School in the SSPS during 1993 to 2003. The school district leaders I selected to interview were involved in the design or implementation of the ninth-grade program. I approached each participant by sending the letter in Appendix A, after which they consented to participate. These leaders included the superintendent during the development and the first year of implementation of the new school level configuration, the principal of Richard Samuel School, and the principal of the high school during the timeframe covered by this case study. I interviewed the principal of RSS a second time using probing questions for follow-up to some of her original responses. I also interviewed a teacher who taught at RSS from 1993 to 2000 and was named assistant principal of RSS in 2000. Finally, I interviewed two former students, each of whom now serves in school system leadership roles. One became a teacher at Richard Samuel School several years later and currently teaches at the high school in the SSPS. The other former student works as a school counselor in a neighboring school

system. The following paragraphs contain details about the participants, all of whom were given a pseudonym for this study.

Dr. Peter Moore served as the superintendent of the SSPS from 1987 until 1994 and led his team in creating the unique ninth-grade center model. He hired the principal and leadership team for the school. He served as a superintendent for 23 years in four different states and is now retired.

Dr. Maureen Wrenn served as the first principal of Richard Samuel School and worked there during the entire time period of the study (1993 to 2003). She worked in education for over 45 years. Dr. Wrenn received numerous regional and national awards that honored the quality of her work as a principal.

Mr. Jordan Potts worked as the principal of the Grade 10 to 12 high school in the SSPS for 22 years, from 1984 to 2006. In addition to the principalship, he was a student, teacher, assistant principal, and assistant superintendent in the SSPS. He had retired from the SSPS when he participated in this study, but he continued to provide professional consultative services to the school system.

Mr. Martin Echols taught at Richard Samuel School from 1993 to 2000. SSPS named him the assistant principal of Richard Samuel School in 2000. He was a student in SPSS prior to the opening of RSS and later a parent of two children who attended Richard Samuel School.

Ms. Lilly Hoover was a student at Richard Samuel School during the 1994-1995 school year. Ms. Hoover served as a teacher at Richard Samuel School from 2003 to 2013 and was teaching at the high school in the SSPS when I interviewed her.

Ms. Kathy Rory attended Richard Samuel School during the 1996-1997 school year. At the time of this study, she served as a school counselor in a secondary school in a neighboring school district.

### **Instrumentation**

Two main sources of data informed this study. I interviewed the participants discussed and examined pertinent and useful documents regarding the implementation of the program. The instrumentation for these data sources are described below.

**Interviews.** I conducted one-on-one, in-person interviews with each participant. Interviews were scheduled for approximately 1 hour at a time and location designated by each participant. During the interviews, I followed an interview protocol (see Appendix B) to ensure standardization and consistency as much as possible during the interview process (Yin, 2014). I followed a semi-structured interview protocol (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I conducted pilot interviews with school leaders with whom I worked to ensure the selected questions were appropriate and would glean the necessary information regarding the transition to ninth grade (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I then conducted interviews with the selected participants and examined data from those identified as key stakeholders in this research study. Interviews were audio recorded using a handheld recorder and a recording program on my computer with the participants' permission. Audio recording allowed for accuracy of the details presented during the interview and was used when I analyzed the data (Creswell, 2012). All interviews were transcribed to "provide data that captures the details of an interview and convert the data to a computer document for later analysis" (Creswell, 2012, p. 239).

The interview questions focused on the ways the school leadership team created structures to address the academic, procedural, and social concerns of students entering ninth grade in the SSPS. The interviews included a discussion of the changes made over time, as well as areas of strength and drawbacks of the program from 1993 until 2003. Follow-up questions served as probes to delve deeper into the topic of transition or to clarify a participant's response (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Documents.** I collected and reviewed “public documents, such as newspapers, minutes of meetings,” data, and SSPS school board reports (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 187). I asked participants to generate documents that pertained to my study and could serve a critical role in the research (see Yin, 2014). These pertinent school documents addressed the evolution and development of the unique model at Richard Samuel School and provided another source to triangulate what was shared in the individual interviews. In addition, I conducted a review of pertinent documents, such as school board minutes, school improvement plans, and news articles from this time period. I analyzed documents describing the programmatic and curricular offerings and reviewed both staff and student handbooks to support my research.

When handling documents, I determined their authenticity and origins. I used the following document review protocol as outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016):

What is the history of the document; how did it come into my hands; what guarantee is there that it is what it pretends to be; is the document complete, as originally constructed; has it been tampered with or edited; if the document is genuine, under what circumstances and for what purposes was it produced; who was/is the author; what was the author trying to accomplish; for whom was the

document intended; what were the maker's source of information; does the document represent an eyewitness account, a secondhand account, a reconstruction of an event long prior to the writing, an interpretation; what was or is the maker's bias; to what extent was the writer likely to want to tell the truth; do other documents exist that might shed additional light on the same story, event, project, program, context; if so, are they available, accessible? Who holds them? (pp. 176-177)

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The discussion of data analysis in qualitative research must clearly indicate how the collected data will be analyzed and clearly describe the proposed procedures (Mertler, 2016, p. 212). Qualitative data analysis involves a process of inductive analysis whereby the volume of information collected is organized into "patterns and themes to construct some sort of framework for presenting key findings of the action research study" (Mertler, 2016, p. 213).

**Organization.** Creswell and Creswell (2018) proposed the data analysis procedures specify the steps in analyzing the various forms of qualitative data, segmenting and "taking apart" the data (p. 190). The data analysis process for this study involved the following steps: "(1) organize and prepare the data for analysis, (2) read or look at all data, (3) start coding all of the data, (4) generate a description and themes, and (5) Represent the description and themes" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 193).

The organization of this research study involved the reduction of narrative data gathered from interview transcripts, the review of documents, and other records. I developed a coding scheme based on patterns and themes gathered from the transcripts.

Creswell (2013) described coding as systematically “involving aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in the study, and then assigning a label to the code” (p. 184). I used a color-coded system to initially group common themes together, and then created an Excel spreadsheet to assist with data organization (Mertler, 2016).

**Description.** After collecting and coding the raw data, I began to make connections between the data and the research questions. I used field notes to capture observations during the interviews and during the review of documents. I analyzed these field notes by constructing codes that I then used to categorize the information (McMillan & Wergin, 2010). I determined how the data in each identified category supported the topic of transition and answered each research question.

**Interpretation.** The interpretation of data involves several procedures: “summarizing the overall findings, comparing the findings to literature, discussing a personal view of the findings, and stating limitations and future research” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 198). Mertler (2016) suggested looking for words or phrases that reflect specific events or observations and begin to repeat themselves throughout the data. “The key is to look for aspects of the data that answer [the] research questions, provide challenges to current or future practice, or may actually guide future practice” (Mertler, 2016, pp. 216-217).

I interpreted the data by creating a spreadsheet that allowed for the collection of key terms and concepts to emerge. Then, I grouped the terms and concepts into categories related to transition; the structures in place to support students and the effectiveness and drawbacks of the program. Additionally, I included quotations that

elicited key points and perspectives in the spreadsheet and placed them in identified categories.

### **Trustworthiness**

The quality of qualitative research depends on the extent of the observation and the background of the observer (McMillan & Wergin, 2010). In order to check the accuracy of the findings and to ensure trustworthiness, I used multiple strategies to confirm the findings were credible, transferable, confirmable, and dependable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertler, 2016; Statistics Solutions, n.d.-a). The four criteria to establish trustworthiness are explained below.

**Credibility.** Credibility is a “strategy for assessing trustworthiness in qualitative studies; involves establishing that the results of qualitative research are credible, or believable, from the perspectives of the participants in the research” (Mertler, 2016, p. 352). The researcher must demonstrate and communicate that the findings of the research study are accurate and true. To accomplish this, I used triangulation and member checking to demonstrate the credibility of the data and my interpretation of this research study (Statistics Solutions, n.d.-b).

Triangulation of data refers to the process of using multiple sources of data, such as interviews and document analysis, to confirm emerging findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I triangulated the data from interviews and documents to provide an accurate record of participants’ experiences regarding the transition efforts employed by the leaders, staff, and students at Richard Samuel School.

I used the process of member checking throughout the analysis for validity purposes by verifying with the participants the accuracy of their data. Member checking

is a “process of asking participants who were directly involved in the study to review the accuracy of the research report” (Mertler, 2016, p. 357). For this research study, I sent each participant in the research study a copy of the interview transcript to review and ensure the accuracy of responses to questions asked during the interview (see Creswell, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transcripts were edited to reflect participant feedback, correct any errors, clarify intentions, and provide additional information.

**Transferability.** “Transferability is how the qualitative researcher demonstrates that the research study’s findings are applicable to other contexts” (Statistics Solutions, n.d.-c, para. 3) or situations, such as similar settings, populations, or phenomena (McMillan & Wergin, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To support that the findings are transferable or applicable to other situations, qualitative researchers can use thick description to show that the research study’s findings and insights might be applicable to their own settings or circumstances (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Statistics Solutions, n.d.-c).

In using the technique of thick description, I provided a more detailed account of my experiences during data collection so someone reading the study could easily identify with the setting (see Mertler, 2016). I made explicit connections to the cultural and social contexts that surrounded data collection and described the interview process in great detail to provide a thorough and rich understanding of the research setting.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability is the “process of establishing neutrality and objectivity of the data” (Mertler, 2016, p. 352). This criterion “involves making sure researcher bias does not skew the interpretation of what the research participants said to fit a certain narrative” and verifies the findings are shaped more by the participants than the researcher (Statistics Solutions, n.d.-d, para. 4).

To establish confirmability, I provided an audit trail by maintaining a detailed account of how I conducted the study. I kept a journal to record details of the data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of the data throughout the study (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, I recorded topics that were unique and interesting during the data collection, documented the coding process, including the rationale for merging codes, and explained the development of themes from my research.

**Dependability.** “Dependability is the extent that the study could be repeated by other researchers and that the findings would be consistent” (Statistics Solutions, n.d.-a, para. 5). Though I journaled every step of the research process, I also incorporated a peer review and external auditor process to address the consistency of my findings and the ability to replicate the research study.

I used a peer examination process as an additional validation measure to enhance the accuracy of the study. The peer examination process supports feedback and reflection on the research process and data gathered from an individual with knowledge of the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The two peer examiners or critical friends for this study were colleagues with doctoral degrees who reviewed and asked questions about the qualitative study to ensure the account would resonate with people other than myself (see Mertler, 2016).

Finally, a researcher outside of the data collection and data analysis process conducted an external audit to confirm the accuracy of the study’s results. The outside researcher examined the processes I used for data collection and data analysis and the results of the research study. All interpretations and conclusions were examined to

determine whether they were supported by the data or whether there was any bias in the collection and reporting of the findings.

### **Ethics, Institutional Review Board, and Confidentiality**

Protecting research participants is most important regardless of the educational research study. “Researchers must ensure the participants receive the following: protection from harm; the right to voluntary and informed participation; the right to privacy; and the researcher’s honesty with professional colleagues” (Mertler, 2016, p. 63). To ensure participants’ anonymity and confidentiality of their interview responses, I took the necessary precautions to protect them throughout their participation in the study (see Yin, 2014). One mechanism for ensuring the ethical treatment of the participants in my research study was to pass an online training course (Mertler, 2016). I successfully completed Virginia Tech’s Training in Human Subjects Protection prior to conducting the research (see Appendix C).

**Institutional Review Board.** I followed all guidelines put in place by the Virginia Tech IRB when working with human participants. I submitted my request to conduct research to the Virginia Tech IRB (see Appendix D) and awaited approval. Once approved, I worked with the SSPS Office of Testing and Accountability prior to collecting any data. I followed all guidelines, approval procedures, and any protocols required by the school district’s research board. All participants received an informed consent document and were told, both in-person and in writing, of their right to stop participation at any time. Each participant was asked to sign the IRB-approved informed consent form (see Appendix D).

**Confidentiality.** According to Creswell (2013), the ethical researcher assures the confidentiality of participants by refraining from identifying the participants in a research study. To ensure the confidentiality of those participating in this research study, I assigned each participant a pseudonym that was used throughout the research process. I was the only one present during the interviews with each of the participants. Typed interview transcripts were given to each individual participant to guarantee the accuracy of their statements. A discussion of member checking is included in the Credibility section.

The data collected during this research study were only accessible by me and my advisor, Dr. William Glenn. Digital copies of the data were stored electronically in a password-protected computer in a separate unidentified folder. Additionally, hard copies of the data, transcripts from interviews, and documents were stored in a locked cabinet. I will erase all electronic copies of the data collected and shred hard copies of all other data and pertinent documents 3 years after the initial collection process.

### **Researcher Bias and Assumptions**

When conducting qualitative research, my role as the researcher is vitally important. As the primary data collection instrument, I must recognize and identify my personal values, assumptions, and biases at the start of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The contributions a researcher makes to the research setting, in this case schools, can be useful and productive to a study.

Researchers may arrive at different conclusions when considering the same data (Stake, 2006). My perceptions as a teacher, a school-based administrator, as well as a central office administrator supporting school leaders and school communities provides a

thorough understanding of the context of this study. As such, I reflected on the data collected through the participant interviews and considered the lens or perspective used to make meaning from the data.

I served in public education for 27 years; 5 years as a high school social studies teacher, 3 years as an assistant principal, 3 years as a high school principal, 3 years as principal of Richard Samuel School (from 2004 to 2007), 2 years as a middle school principal, 3 years as an elementary school principal, 2 years as a central office administrator in the SSPS, and 6 years as an executive principal, providing oversight of roughly 50 schools in a large suburban school district. During my career, I have had the opportunity to observe transition practices at various school levels, including entry to kindergarten, entry to middle school, entry to ninth grade, entry to high school, and entry to postsecondary options. My career has spanned three different states and school systems of varying sizes.

In each position held, I have had a focus on successful school transitions. As a high school teacher, I sponsored the Student Council Association and worked with student leaders to promote school participation and ways to create connectedness and a positive school culture. As a high school assistant principal, I was able to influence transition efforts from a larger, schoolwide lens through the use of retention data and anecdotal data from teachers, parents, and students. As a building-level principal at all three levels, I learned through each experience the importance of developmentally appropriate transition efforts. As an elementary school principal, I learned that students may need more time to acquire literacy and numeracy skills and the importance of grade-level collaborative teams of teachers meeting and discussing the individual needs of

students and putting in place appropriate interventions to prepare students for the next grade level and ultimately middle school. As a middle school principal (i.e., Grades 6 through 8), I learned how little time middle school educators have to remediate or accelerate students in preparation for ninth grade. The instructional match with intervention programs is critical given the time students spend during their middle school years. As a ninth-grade principal, I saw firsthand the importance of school readiness at the high school level to ensure students are on track for high school graduation. This unique school design provided me with the leadership opportunity to place students, by need, on co-curricular teams to further support the work of the middle school teams. Finally, as a principal of a traditional high school with students in Grades 9 through 12, a vital priority was creating 4-year plans to ensure graduation and postsecondary plans were in place for students to achieve success and on-time graduation.

### **Limitations**

Limitations stipulate the weaknesses of the study, which encourages the reader to judge the results with the limitations in mind (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Limitations derive from the design and methods and help contextualize a study. Two limitations existed with regard to this study.

First, the most significant limitation for this case study was the effect of the passage of time. I examined the first 10 years of the unique ninth-grade program, from 1993 to 2003, and conducted the interviews 15 years later. The school staff who participated in this study were purposefully selected given their role in the development and implementation of the programs and were, for the most part, able to recall poignant information for the study during the inaugural years of the program. The students,

however, who participated in the study were able to recollect a few targeted examples that supported efforts around their transition to ninth grade. I attempted to mitigate the limitation created by the passage of time by selecting two former students who were current educators, one who taught at Richard Samuel School for several years and was teaching in the SSPS high school (Grades 10 through 12) and another who was serving as a middle school counselor in another school district.

The second limitation to the study relates to my role as a former principal of Richard Samuel School. I served as principal from 2005 through 2008, after the time period covered by this study. In addition to the intentionality of selecting the first 10 years of the program, which included the background on the development of the program as an effort to limit potential bias, I used bracketing as a means of limiting that bias during the completion of the interviews.

In addition, I identified two people to serve as “critical friends” throughout the writing of my dissertation. I chose Dr. Aimee Holleb and Dr. Eric Brent as critical friends for several reasons. Both of these esteemed leaders participated in the previous doctoral cohort at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and both conducted qualitative research studies of their own in which they interviewed former principals and students, respectively. Further, both leaders have worked as principals in secondary schools and thoroughly understand the importance of the work leaders must do to support students in the transition from middle school to high school. Throughout my research study, I engaged in ongoing dialogue about every aspect of my study with Drs. Holleb and Brent. Through the writing of their own dissertations, they used an inquiry approach

to support my thinking and learning, which allowed me to analyze and critique the steps I employed while writing my dissertation.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are the boundaries the researcher has set for the study and the parameters of the investigation. I was interested in the background of the development of Richard Samuel School and the principles upon which it was founded. Additionally, I was interested in hearing from students who attended during the early years of the program's development. Thus, I selected the first 10 years of the school configuration to examine (i.e., 1993 to 2003).

### **Summary of Methodology**

This chapter addressed the methodology I used in this single-case study of Richard Samuel School's unique ninth-grade model in the SSPS. Study participants included former and current school leaders and staff, as well as former students during the years from 1993 to 2003. I used qualitative data collection methods, to include a semi-structured interview protocol, review of documents, and peer debriefing. I triangulated the data collected to determine themes in identifying structures that support student transition challenges and their effectiveness. This chapter also contained details of the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of this research study. The results of the study were intended to provide school leaders with an understanding of the importance of addressing the academic, procedural, and social challenges students face when transitioning from middle school to high school.

**CHAPTER III: ANALYSIS OF A STAND ALONE NINTH GRADE SCHOOL  
TRANSITION MODEL: 1993-2003**

**Grace E. Taylor**

**Abstract**

The movement from middle school to high school is a crucial period as adolescents frequently have a difficult time acclimating to the high school environment and often experience a decline in their academic achievement from middle school to ninth grade (DeLamar & Brown, 2016; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Fulk, 2003; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Neild, 2009). Many students who drop out of school do so in ninth grade and do not graduate on time with their classmates (Asplaugh, 1998; Bottoms, 2002; Fulk, 2003; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). The components of a successful middle school to high school transition program address the academic, procedural, and social challenges students face during this time.

Richard Samuel School (RSS), a stand-alone ninth-grade center, has addressed transition challenges for over 25 years. The focus in this single case study research was to examine the reasons for development of this unique school configuration, as well as the programmatic structures created to address students' academic, procedural, and social concerns, through the perceptions of former students, staff, and administrators. The goal was to identify the effectiveness, benefits, and drawbacks of the program design that addressed the middle school to high school transition for all students at RSS from its inception in 1993 until 2003.

Responsive and supportive accountability among staff and students was evident through the work of the school support team and other transition structures, such as core

content teachers planning for and teaching advanced and standard level curriculum coupled with student placement on an interdisciplinary team and every student assigned to a teacher advisor. As a result, a decline in student retention occurred and after year three of implementation, there was a 0% dropout rate. The results of this study contribute to research regarding impactful transition programming from middle school to high school.

*Keywords:* ninth-grade transition, high school, challenges, academic, procedural, social

### **Background**

The transition from middle school to high school can cause students to experience anxiety, as it signifies an important next step in their school trajectory. Students experience all types of emotions and levels of anxiety in response to the different routines in a new school environment, changes in peer relationships, and increased academic demands and expectations. The transition to ninth grade can become further complicated as adolescence brings a variety of other changes that students must adjust to, including puberty, changes in peer relations, and new cognitive capabilities (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, & Cochrane, 2008; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006).

Schiller (1999) contended that school transitions involve “a process during which institutional and social factors influence which students’ educational careers are positively or negatively affected by this movement between organizations” (pp. 216-217). The first year of high school proves difficult for many students as it coincides with increased independence and peer influence, along with decreased parental supervision. Ninth-grade students usually move to a new school, leaving behind familiarity of teachers

and peers. Many students enter ninth grade inadequately prepared for the academic rigor, which becomes a major source of difficulty (Neild, 2009). Students who manage the increased academic demands during the transition to high school usually graduate 4 years later (Neild, 2009), whereas students who struggle during their ninth-grade year face an increased risk of being retained or dropping out of high school (Bottoms, 2002; Fulk, 2003; Neild, 2009).

The challenges students experience during this transition can be categorized into three areas: academic, procedural, and social concerns (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000; Block, 2016; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ellerbrock, Denmon, & Owens, 2015; Smith et al., 2006). Academic concerns include the need for students and their parents to understand more rigorous expectations, homework, earning course credits, and grading systems. Procedural challenges occur as students are adjusting to a new, typically larger environment, including how to select new courses, limited time to travel to their next class, and unfamiliar schedules. Social issues students face include wanting to participate in extracurricular activities, such as joining an athletic team, theater program, or an afterschool club, often while acclimating to a school culture with many more students and unfamiliar teachers (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Potter, Schliskey, Stevenson, & Drawdy, 2001).

The academic, procedural, and social challenges are unique to each student, but typically revolve around commonalities that can be connected to all students. Transitions between educational levels affect virtually all students in some way (Anderson et al., 2000). Students are going through puberty and experiencing “decreased motivation, lowered self-esteem, and increased psychological distress” (Akos & Galassi, 2004, p.

212). Many ninth-grade students face some decline with their grade point averages (Anderson et al., 2000). Other students experience declines in school satisfaction, demonstrate a less positive attitude toward school work, and experience decreases in self-efficacy and self-esteem (Anderson et al., 2000).

Though students typically have had experience with changing classes and having multiple teachers in middle school, the adjustment to ninth grade includes another layer for students. In ninth grade, students realize the truth of the advice they received during middle school regarding the importance of their grades and the need to stay on top of their work (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Further, both parents and students identified additional concerns facing rising ninth-grade students, such as their readiness for the rigor of high school courses and the increased expectations of their teachers. Many reported students feeling they have not established a supportive relationship with their new teachers as compared to their earlier school experiences (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Block, 2016; Hauser, Choate, & Thomas, 2009; Smith, Akos, Lim, & Wiley, 2008; Smith et al., 2006). As such, often students who struggle see their grades drop during ninth grade (Alspaugh, 1998; Seidman, Allen, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994; Smith, 2006).

Students transitioning to high school often look forward to meeting new friends, participating in social activities, and gaining independence (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Block, 2016; Letrello & Miles, 2003). In addition, they gain many new opportunities such as playing sports, joining clubs, making new friends, and developing independence (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Letrello & Miles, 2003). Though they are looking forward to these new opportunities, students must also balance other concerns, discussed below.

As new friends are made, students risk losing long-term friendships. Additionally, participation in sports, social activities, and developing independence require new skills. As a result of their broadened social circle, students face increased peer pressure, older students, and the possibility of being bullied (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Block, 2016; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Smith et al., 2006; Weiss & Bearman, 2007). The changes coincide with adolescent development in which peer relationships are paramount (Langenkamp, 2010).

Students who enter ninth grade with academic and social challenges encounter a higher risk of attendance and behavioral issues and of dropping out of high school (DeLamar & Brown, 2016). Langenkamp (2010) contended that “social relationships with peers may be even more powerful than bonds with teachers in predicting how students fare academically in the transition to high school, because cohorts of students typically move through the school system together” (p. 3). Students from underserved backgrounds face an increased risk of experiencing these problems.

Roderick (2003) asserted:

The traditional large anonymous urban high school with its uneven quality, disconnected programming, and lack of attention to guidance and student development is simply not up to the task of promoting high levels of engagement and achievement for minority adolescents in urban communities. (p. 580)

Students with special needs also confront a higher risk of dropping out, as over 25% of special education students drop out of school early in their high school careers (Frasier, 2007).

Research shows developing programs dedicated to supporting transition efforts directly relates to a decrease in ninth-grade student retention as well as behavior and attendance concerns (Duke, Bourdeaux, Epps, & Wilcox, 1998; Erickson, Peterson, & Lembeck, 2013b). A high school's administration must focus on core instruction and soft skills, such as time management, organization, and study skills, in order to help struggling ninth-grade students stay on track for graduation (Neild, 2009). Similarly, transition programs must meet the procedural and social needs of their students.

The configuration of the school plays an important role in the transition. Some comprehensive high schools separate ninth graders into "academies" or identify a section of the building as the ninth-grade "house." Such a grouping enables the ninth graders to remain, as much as possible, in a section of the school with their grade-level peers (Neild et al., 2008). Other school configurations continue the concept of middle school teams as students matriculate to high school, thus keeping teams of students grouped with common content teachers. The team approach allows for the development of stronger relationships with peers and teachers, as well as provides opportunities for teachers to create cross-curricular lesson plans (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Given the connection between school configuration and student success in ninth grade, the purpose of this study was to examine transition issues related to a stand-alone ninth-grade school created in 1993. The Small Suburban Public Schools (SSPS) district designed the "ninth-grade center" (i.e., Richard Samuel School [RSS]) initially to alleviate increased enrollment in the district. The superintendent of schools, at the time, referred to "gradedness," a belief he held that certain grade levels, such as sixth grade and

ninth grade, did not “fit” in their current school configurations of having sixth graders in elementary schools and ninth graders in junior high schools. He asserted that multiple factors, such as social emotional development and the varied maturity levels of students in this stage of their growth and development, would be better served if sixth graders were placed in middle schools, thus eliminating junior high schools in the school district, and ninth graders placed in a single grade level setting. In making these changes, he believed their varied needs would be addressed appropriately by school staff in these school settings.

Specific to this study, the superintendent believed that ninth grade should not be placed in a large suburban high school (P. Moore, personal communication, December 20, 2018). What emerged was the creation of a unique grade configuration with structures to address the various challenges facing students entering high school in SSPS (M. Wrenn, personal communication, November 4, 2017).

The focus in this single case study research was to examine the reasons for development of this unique school configuration, as well as the programmatic structures created to address students’ academic, procedural, and social concerns through the perceptions of former students, staff, and administrators. The goal was to identify the effectiveness, benefits, and drawbacks of the program design that addressed the middle school to high school transition for all students at RSS. The focus in the study was to analyze the program during the first 10 years of its existence, from its inception in 1993 until 2003.

RSS opened with 702 ninth-grade students and 61 teachers. During this study, from 1993 to 2003, the demographic make-up of the school remained steady. The

student population was approximately 35% White, over 25% Black, over 25% Hispanic, and 15% other. Approximately, 15% of the students received special education services, over 50% of the students were economically disadvantaged as defined by receiving free or reduced lunch, and 25% of the students were labeled as limited English proficient.

During the 1993-1994 school year, the incoming students came from two different junior high schools (Grades 7-9) and were scheduled into one of five interdisciplinary teams. In subsequent school years (1994-2003), the incoming students came from two different middle schools (Grades 6-8) as the school district reconfigured its junior high schools to middle schools. The school staff placed each student on one of five teams, so the students on one team all received instruction and advice from the same set of teachers. In the first 2 years, each team provided students the same resources, including both standard and advanced curricular options and an advisory period twice a week.

In 1995, a sixth team, referred to as the “S” team, was added. In doing so, all teams were referred to by a letter of the school’s name, S-A-M-U-E-L. However, the “S” team differed from the other teams because school staff placed students who were at-risk academically and behaviorally and who had had poor attendance in eighth grade on that team. The school staffed the “S” team with additional resources (e.g., a dedicated guidance counselor and social worker) to address their varying social–emotional needs. The “S” team students attended smaller classes, in order for the school to support issues such as attendance, conflict mediation, and substance abuse issues, and to connect students with community resources (M. Wrenn, personal communication, November 4, 2017).

The design principles of Richard Samuel School (RSS) provided a unique ninth-grade transition option. District leaders hoped this design, often described as “effectiveness by design,” would increase student achievement by personalizing the education for ninth grade students in order to help them overcome the academic, social, and procedural challenges presented by the middle school to high school transition (M. Wrenn, personal communication, November 4, 2017).

### **Methodology**

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for this single case study. Mertler (2016) defined purposeful sampling as “sampling strategies that involve the intentional selection of individuals and sites to learn about or understand the topic at hand” (p. 361). It is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). The population for this study included the former school system leaders, staff, and students at Richard Samuel School in the SSPS during 1993 to 2003.

### **Data Sources**

The school district leaders selected to interview were those who were involved in the design or implementation of the ninth-grade program (see Appendix A). These leaders included the superintendent who served from 1987 to 1994 and was responsible for reconfiguring two junior high schools serving students in Grades 7 through 9 to two middle schools, therefore moving sixth grade from the elementary schools to create middle schools with students in Grades 6 through 8. In doing so, Grade 9 was placed in a stand-alone building, RSS, and students in Grades 10 through 12 were housed in a

comprehensive high school two blocks from RSS. I interviewed the former principal of RSS who served from 1993 to 2003, the former principal of the high school (Grades 10-12) who served from 1984 until 2006, and a former teacher who served from 1993 until 2000. Finally, I interviewed two former students who attended during the 1994-1995 and 1996-1997 school years, respectively. Additionally, both former students interviewed served in school system leadership roles; one was a former teacher at Richard Samuel School and was currently teaching at the high school in the Small Suburban Public Schools and the other student interviewed was a school counselor in a neighboring school system.

In-person interviews were conducted one-on-one, with each participant, using a semi-structured protocol to ensure standardization and consistency as much as possible during the interview process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014). Interviews were scheduled for approximately 1 hour at a time at a location designated by each participant.

The focus of the interview questions was on the structures the school leadership team created to address the academic, procedural, and social concerns of students entering ninth grade at RSS (see Appendix B). Additionally, I asked participants about changes that occurred over time, as well as areas of strength, benefits and drawbacks of the program from 1993 until 2003. Follow-up questions served as probes to delve deeper into the topic of transition or to clarify a participant's response (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Public documents, such as newspapers, minutes of meetings, school data, and official school board reports were reviewed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 187). These pertinent school documents addressed the evolution and development of the unique

model at RSS, as well as provided evidence of strengths and areas of focus for school system leaders.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in qualitative research must clearly indicate how the collected data will be analyzed and clearly describe the proposed procedures (Mertler, 2016). Data analysis involves the general process of inductive analysis. The data were read, reread, organized, condensed, and synthesized so I was able to determine themes, categories, or patterns that emerged from those data (Creswell, 2013; Mertler, 2016; Yin, 2014). The overview of the data analysis process for this study was as follows: “(1) organize and prepare the data for analysis, (2) read or look at all data, (3) start coding all of the data, (4) generate a description and themes, and (5) represent the description and themes” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 193).

The organization of this research study involved the reduction of narrative data gathered from interview transcripts, the review of documents, and other records. As such, coding the data “involves the text data or pictures gathered during data collection, segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories, and labeling those categories with a term” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 193). I used a color-coded system to initially group common themes together, and then created an Excel spreadsheet to assist with organization and later, data description and interpretation (Mertler, 2016).

After collecting and coding the raw data, I began to make connections between the data and the research questions. Field notes were used to capture observations during the interviews and the review of documents. Mertler (2016) suggested looking for words or phrases that reflect specific events or observations and begin to repeat themselves

throughout the data. As such, the field notes were analyzed by constructing codes and used to categorize the information (McMillan & Wergin, 2010). I determined how the data in each identified category supported the topic of transition and answered each research question.

### **Trustworthiness**

The quality of qualitative research depends on the extent of the observation and the background of the observer (McMillan & Wergin, 2010). In order to check the accuracy of the findings and to ensure trustworthiness, I used multiple strategies to confirm the findings were credible, transferable, confirmable, and dependable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertler, 2016).

The first strategy involved triangulating data from interviews and documents against one another to provide an accurate record of participants' experiences regarding the transition efforts employed by the leaders, staff, and students at RSS. In doing so, I was able to show that the findings were supported by different types of evidence (Mertler, 2016).

The second strategy, member checking, was used throughout the analysis process by verifying with the participants the accuracy of their data. For this research study, each participant was sent a copy of their interview transcript to review and to ensure the accuracy of responses to questions asked during the interview (see Creswell, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I edited the transcripts to reflect participant feedback, correct any errors, clarify intentions, and provide additional information.

A third strategy involved providing a detailed description of the data collection so someone reading the study could identify with the setting (Mertler, 2016). I made

explicit connections to the cultural and social contexts that surrounded data collection to provide a thorough and rich understanding of the research setting.

The fourth strategy involved providing an audit trail by maintaining a detailed account of how the study was conducted. I kept a journal to record details of the data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of the data throughout the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, I recorded topics that were presented during the data collection, documented the coding process, including the rationale for merging codes, and explained the development of themes from my research.

The fifth strategy used included a peer examination process as an additional validation measure to enhance the accuracy of the study. The peer examination process supports feedback and reflection on the research process and data gathered from an individual with knowledge of the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The two peer examiners or critical friends for this study were colleagues with doctoral degrees who reviewed and asked questions about the qualitative study to ensure the account would be relevant and meaningful to others (see Mertler, 2016).

Finally, a researcher outside of the data collection and data analysis process conducted an external audit to confirm the accuracy of the study's results. The outside researcher examined the processes used for data collection and data analysis and the results of the research study. All interpretations and conclusions were examined to determine whether they were supported by the data or whether there was any bias in the collection and reporting of the findings.

## **Researcher Bias and Assumptions**

When conducting qualitative research, my role as the researcher is vitally important. As the primary data collection instrument, I must recognize and identify my personal values, assumptions, and biases at the start of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The contributions a researcher makes to the research setting, in this case schools, can be useful and productive to a study.

Researchers may arrive at different conclusions when considering the same data (Stake, 2006). My perceptions as a teacher, a school-based administrator, as well as a central office administrator supporting school leaders and communities provided a thorough understanding of the context of this study. As such, I reflected on information gathered through the interview process and considered the lens or perspective used to make meaning from the data.

## **Results**

The six interviews provided data to address the research questions, particularly supporting the research on school-based structures established to address the academic, procedural, and social challenges students face when transitioning from eighth grade to ninth grade in the SSPS. The findings of this research study can serve as one exemplar for intentional transition programming and practices to ensure student success.

### **Development of Richard Samuel School**

The SSPS developed RSS as a unique solution to address a surge in enrollment in the district's elementary schools. Prior to the development of RSS, the configuration of the district consisted of 10 elementary schools that housed students in Kindergarten

through Grade 6, two junior high schools that housed students in Grades 7 through 9, and a single high school that housed students in Grades 10 through 12.

When the SSPS experienced an increase in student enrollment at the elementary school level, district leaders discussed moving from the existing junior high model to a middle school model. Superintendent Peter Moore recalled that during this time a discussion on what he referred to as “gradedness” was occurring in the SSPS community. He presented research to a community stakeholder group that closely examined the placement of sixth- and ninth-grade levels in schools. Superintendent Moore told the community, “When you look at these two grade levels, they don’t fit where they are currently placed. Sixth-grade students do not belong in an elementary school and ninth-graders do not belong in a large suburban high school” (P. Moore, personal communication, December 20, 2018). Moore believed that, developmentally, students at these grade levels needed additional support from school professionals. Additionally, research on high school completion was shared with the school board and community stakeholder group that indicated students in

A traditional high school, with Grades 9 through 12, approximately 40% of an administrator’s time was spent handling ninth-grade issues; and that success in ninth grade was the number one predictor . . . for success in high school and graduating within 4 years. (M. Echols, personal communication, December 11, 2018)

The shift to a middle school model, Grades 6 through 8, solved the problem of sixth grade being housed in an elementary school. However, the proposal to move the city’s two junior highs, Grades 7 through 9, to a middle school model required the school

board to determine what to do about ninth grade. Superintendent Moore led the charge with the SSPS school board to develop the unique model of creating a school just for ninth-graders that would be located in the administrative building at the time, a former school building. The logistics and preparations needed to move to the new grade configurations were identified and addressed over the course of a school year with input from SSPS school board members and staff. In 1993, the district hired Dr. Maureen Wrenn, the first principal at RSS, less than a year prior to the opening of the school and charged her with carrying out the superintendent's vision of designing the school to address the myriad needs facing ninth-graders. Therefore, the district developed RSS for the dual purposes of accommodating expanding enrollments and addressing the superintendent's concerns about including ninth graders in a large suburban high school.

### **Structures to Address the Academic Concerns of Students**

Interview data revealed the following as effective structures to address the academic concerns of students. The primary concerns included an increased workload and more rigorous assignments. This section contains a discussion of the approaches implemented at the school to address academic concerns.

**Student placement on interdisciplinary teams.** Five of the six participants interviewed (three of four staff and both students) indicated students were placed on teams prior to the start of the school year. The administrative team placed students based on whether or not the students were enrolled in general level or advanced level English, science, and social studies classes and balanced each team with an equal number of students taking advanced courses with those who were not (M. Wrenn, personal communication, December 10, 2018).

The placement on interdisciplinary teams allowed for increased collaboration in lesson planning, according to staff, and depth in the content presented through shared research projects and not taught in isolation, according to students. One student shared:

I did a research paper on the middle ages . . . Queen Elizabeth in English. And then, we had this Renaissance Fair where we got to dress up and pretend to be that person, and present our work . . . our research to other students. (L. Hoover, personal communication, December 13, 2018)

Teachers were able to “hit the bullets needed to hit in their curriculum, but also made it engaging and an enriching experience for all of us” (L. Hoover, personal communication, December 13, 2018). Participants cited that mathematics placement tended to be a bit more challenging based on students’ varied levels and often resulted in movement to another team for a particular course.

**Implementation of teacher advisory.** Teacher advisory periods were created to support students with the transition to high school. The teacher advisory period met weekly. Teacher advisors were assigned to no more than 15 students, which allowed for individualized attention to be given to each assigned student. Topics discussed during this period ranged from academic topics regarding earning high school credits and grades to social–emotional topics regarding school connectedness and attendance. Five of the participants interviewed (three of four staff and both students) indicated students were placed on teams prior to the start of the school year. Student participants recalled a school counselor presenting the importance of high school credit and what students needed to graduate during the teacher advisory period. One student stated:

I think the teachers had a certain mindset that made [RSS teachers] a little bit different than those who were dealing with kids in Grades 9 through 12, like when they could just focus on the ninth-graders it made them more—better able to cater to us and the things we needed, and helped us ultimately. (K. Rory, personal communication, December 12, 2018)

**Access to advanced or extracurricular curriculum.** All of the participants interviewed indicated students had access to advanced curriculum to meet their academic needs. Every team, ultimately, had an equal number of students pursuing honors courses and an equal number of students pursuing “standard” courses (M. Wrenn, personal communication, December 10, 2018). As the core content teachers were already writing lesson plans for the honors level curriculum, the standard level course was a “better” course because the teachers had already done the preparation for the rigor of the honors level course (M. Wrenn, personal communication, December 10, 2018).

Additionally, students interested in participating in the JROTC, band, or music programs were able to participate in these options at the high school. According to one of the interviewees, “[RSS students] were not going to have their own little band program . . . or their own theatre program on the side, [that] needed to be a part of the high school experience and a part of the high school” (M. Wrenn, personal communication, December 10, 2018). An additional class period was added to the comprehensive high school master schedule to accommodate the participation and inclusion of students from RSS (J. Potts, personal communication, December 13, 2018).

### **Structures to Address the Procedural Concerns of Students**

Data provided during the interviews identified the teacher advisory period as a consistent structure to address the procedural concerns students had regarding the move to ninth grade. All of the participants identified that students were concerned about going to ninth grade in a new school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Mizelle, 2005; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). According to the students, the teacher advisory period was a “safe” place to ask questions that ninth graders, new to high school, would have, such as the location of classes, the cafeteria, or their school counselor. According to the staff, the purpose of the teacher advisory period was to acclimate students to high school and to answer their questions.

### **Structures to Address the Social Concerns of Students**

The data provided during the interviews supported that addressing the social aspects of the transition was critical in building relationships between students and teachers, as well as relationships with students and their peers. The implementation of the teacher advisory period and the role of the School Support Team were critical in addressing the social concerns of students.

**Implementation of teacher advisory.** The implementation of the teacher advisory period for all students enabled the teachers to “know each child” (M. Wrenn, personal communication, February 17, 2019). As expressed by one participant, the teacher advisory “allowed for some relationship formation . . . that [was] important time for young people going through puberty” (L. Hoover, personal communication, December 13, 2018).

Five of the participants (three of four staff and both students) interviewed indicated the teacher advisory period was effective in addressing any social challenges expressed by students. One participant shared that the teacher advisory period allowed for the small group of students to become a “small community” (L. Hoover, personal communication, December 13, 2018). This was done through various team competitions to support team building opportunities or the development of peer relationships. Additionally, teacher advisories allowed for class discussions and reinforcement of high school expectations.

**Implementation of school support team.** All four of the staff participants recognized the School Support Team (SST) as a critical component to the success of RSS. The SST comprised the principal, director of student services, school counselor, social worker, school psychologist, school nurse, behavior resource teacher, and two city employees—a substance abuse counselor and a homebound social worker. The team held sacred a 75-minute weekly meeting in which they discussed students who were struggling socially, and often times, academically, at RSS. The team followed an agenda that outlined the status of the student’s situation and next steps to support his or her success. The SST created the plan as well as committed to follow-up in achieving the goal of “all means all and everyone succeeds” (M. Wrenn, personal communication, February 17, 2019).

### **Changes to Meet the Needs of Students and Staff**

Participants were asked about their recollection of changes made between 1993 and 2003 to meet the needs of students and staff at RSS. Further, participants were asked to explain why the changes were needed and whether the changes accomplished their

objective. Data provided during the interviews with staff indicated minimal changes were made to the program to meet the needs of students and staff.

**Individual student data.** Three of the staff participants referred to the “one pager” data sheet that was created and developed during the first 3 years (1993-1996) of RSS’s existence to support student achievement. The data page provided staff an overview of a student’s academic, attendance, and discipline history while enrolled in the SSPS. These data were used to create balanced and equitable school teams and to prepare the SST to provide the necessary supports on day one within the school or from city agencies. This “one pager” became an exemplar for other schools in the SSPS (M. Wrenn, personal communication, February 17, 2019).

**School climate teams.** Three of the staff participants referenced teaming as an effective means to monitor school climate. Six school climate teams developed over time and comprised the associate principal, school counselor, team leader, and team teachers, as needed. The school climate team met weekly and focused on school climate through the implementation of the “four Cs: commitment, compassion, conversation, and consequences” (M. Wrenn, personal communication, December 10, 2018). The “Four Cs” served as guiding principles for RSS’s behavioral plan. Staff exhibited a commitment to ensuring student success, compassion in doing so through necessary conversation, and following through on any consequences as a result of student misbehavior but always doing so from a teaching stance (M. Wrenn, personal communication, December 10, 2018).

## **Effectiveness of Program**

The participants' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the RSS ninth-grade program were examined. Participants were asked to name the benefits and drawbacks of the transition program.

**Benefits.** Data provided by all six participants identified the following as consistent themes related to benefits of the ninth-grade program at RSS.

***Relationships.*** Relationships between students and their teachers, as well as relationships between students and other school-aged peers, were identified as a benefit due in large part to the configuration of the school. The size of a single grade level school compared to a large, multi-grade level comprehensive high school coupled with students being placed on interdisciplinary teams enabled strong relationships to form.

What we've learned at ninth grade is that you have to guide a lot more and you can do that through the relationship that [you have] with the student. You can't just say, "If you need help, go see so and so." You've got to . . . look and see if someone's never asking for help. (M. Echols, personal communication, December 11, 2018)

***Supported student development.*** In addition to placement on teams, students were assigned a teacher advisor whose responsibility it was to conference with students, both individually and in small groups, regarding progress and grade reports, attendance issues, and other school-related concerns. One of the former students interviewed reflected on her teacher advisory experience and stated, "I don't know if it was top-down from the administration . . . or required or if it was just like 'this is your group; take care of them'" (L. Hoover, personal communication, December 13, 2018).

*Elimination of student retention.* The course credit requirement once students enter ninth grade often leads to far too many students not completing ninth grade in 1 year and leads to the “ninth-grade bulge” in many school systems where there are more students in ninth grade than eighth or 10th grade. The growing independence of ninth-graders also makes it more feasible for them to drop out of school to seek work or other activities. Often, difficulties in ninth grade lead students to drop out of school, so the two issues are linked.

The elimination of student retention over a 3-year period at RSS was a benefit leaders of other school systems aspired to replicate (M. Wrenn, personal communication, February 19, 2019). The focus on the retention of students was a priority for every staff member at RSS and was demonstrated through the programs and support structures in place to ensure “effectiveness by design” (M. Wrenn, personal communication, February 19, 2019).

**Drawbacks.** All of the participants indicated that a single-grade level school lacks the ability to immediately identify role models for students as it related to discipline matters, in particular. One participant expressed, “Ninth graders are crazy and there’s no one to help them see how to act normal” (L. Hoover, personal communication, December 13, 2018). The adjustment to increased academic and behavioral expectations was noted as taking more time than if students were in a school with older students who could serve as role models for higher expectations. As one student described:

I mean there is sometimes chaos. Ninth-grade boys especially. I mean somebody needs to be there to be like “that’s not how you act” and as you remember girls are somewhat OK in my opinion, from what I saw as a student. But boys were

running around. Boys were smoking stuff in the hallways. Like just stupid stuff that I guess you have to do because you have to get that out of your system as a growing person, and it's probably a safer place to do it and get in trouble in a small ninth grade school, rather than a giant high school where you'll get sort of no tolerance policies. I think it's a drawback and a benefit that there is a small community because there is no one to show the kids what appropriate behavior is. (L. Hoover, personal communication, December 13, 2018)

A staff participant indicated:

[Some] ninth-graders did not believe that he or she was really in high school at RSS. That it was still like middle school. That behaviors that they see are relatively middle school behaviors because there aren't the older role models to try and keep them straight . . . you don't have the role models to kind of get the kids to see that school really is serious at this level. (M. Echols, personal communication, December 11, 2018)

### **Discussion of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to examine a stand-alone program in the SSPS that was created to support student success in the transition from middle school to high school. Results of this case study of RSS showed the programmatic design and embedded practices implemented in all classrooms throughout the school yielded positive results over time in addressing the academic, procedural, and social challenges students face during the middle school to high school transition. A review of the literature indicated targeted transition programs decrease dropout rates for ninth-graders (DeLamar & Brown, 2016; Duke et al., 1998; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Erickson et al., 2013b;

Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). In years one and two of implementation, the ninth-grade retention rates were 11% and 6%, respectively, and by year three no student was retained (M. Wrenn, personal communication, February 19, 2019).

Student participants expressed that teachers at RSS had a mindset that allowed for more flexibility and understanding during the transition from middle school to high school:

We knew it was serious and that [course credits] counted at this point. It was like a little bit more of a middle—not middle school mindset but a little more like I said, just flexibility, in terms of like “OK, here is a study guide to start with. Let’s kind of ease you into this high school thing instead of just throwing you in there and hoping you know how to tread water.” (K. Rory, personal communication, December 12, 2018)

The drawback of not having high school role models in the building resounded among the participants, particularly for students who may have been struggling with the transition of increased rigor and behavior expectations in the classroom (M. Echols, personal communication, December 11, 2018). During the second year, an alternative “mainstream recovery” team, “Team S,” was created to address the targeted needs of students through a 1:10 teacher–student ratio. The team comprised six teachers and a full-time school counselor with access to a behavior resource teacher. This team was identified as a key component in the immediate reduction of the retention rate.

The open access to advanced coursework, coupled with a behavioral plan based on the Four Cs (i.e., commitment, compassion, conversation, and consequences), provided a framework in which the teaching staff focused on the first three Cs and the

administrative team guaranteed appropriate consequences when handling student misbehavior. As such, discipline referrals dropped 10% during the first year (M. Wrenn, personal communication, December 10, 2018).

The principal of RSS referred affectionately to the school as “Team Samuel.” She believed strongly in a concept she referred to as “responsive and supportive accountability” (M. Wrenn, personal communication, December 10, 2018). By placing students on a team supported by a teacher advisor with a 1:15 teacher–student ratio, students were guaranteed to be connected to a caring adult in the school. Every adult in the building was committed to providing students with individualized support based on both quantitative and qualitative assessments, attendance records, and discipline data through the design of various team support initiatives.

Student supports were identified prior to the first day of ninth grade through the systematic “one-page” data sheets so the individualized placement of students on teams was intentional and provided intervention, remediation, or enrichment as needed immediately. The student participants shared at great length how the schoolwide supports fostered their development at the time, easing them into the rigor of high school curriculum while balancing it with understanding where they were socially and developmentally. One participant referred to the approach as creating “a little space [for students] to kind of grow together, come together as a group and then move on” (K. Rory, personal communication, December 12, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

The components of a successful transition program from middle school to high school must address the academic, procedural, and social challenges students face during

this time (Akos & Galassi, 2004). RSS was created to address the needs of all students when entering high school. Through the implementation of targeted supports, from daily teacher advisory periods to the SST that met every week, no student could get lost. Every student was connected to a caring adult, whether it was a team teacher or a teacher advisor. As a result, relationships were developed and provided “responsive and supportive accountability” to every student (M. Wrenn, personal communication, November 4, 2017). Further, students were exposed to, if not enrolled in, honors level curriculum as every core content teacher planned for the delivery of honors curriculum. Student achievement increased and by year three the RSS team had eliminated retention at the ninth-grade level.

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## CHAPTER IV: #GOTNINTHGRADETRANSITION

**Grace E. Taylor**

When students enter ninth grade, they leave the often challenging middle school years behind them. After 2 or 3 short years of middle school, with its ample opportunities to develop relationships with students and teachers, they are off to high school. Most students become comfortable and ultimately exhibit progress in their school environment once they figure out the lay of the land.

Transitions between levels of schools can cause difficulties for ninth-grade students. Across school systems, there are varied approaches to the middle school years. The first major transition occurs when students enter middle school, as they enter a system that differs substantially from elementary school. For the first time, students are faced with no recess once they enter middle school. Additionally, students no longer are assigned to just one classroom teacher. In middle school, they move to different classrooms with seven or eight different teachers, sometimes with a traditional schedule and sometimes with a block schedule that rotates every other day. However, middle schools typically ease the transition in a number of ways: some schools follow a teamed approach with students placed on a team for their four core content courses (i.e., English, social studies, math, and science), whereas others have a hybrid approach where students may be teamed for only two courses. Most students master the middle school years and advance to navigate high school—ninth grade.

Ninth grade is a pivotal year for students in many ways. Developmentally, students are in the middle of adolescence and are experiencing mental, physical, and behavioral changes. This time in students' lives is compounded not only by their growth

and development, but by increased opportunities when it comes to decision-making, peer pressure, and an overall search for who they are and where they fit in among their peer group. Identifying a social group and making friends is critical during this stage of development.

Though many middle schools offer high school credit bearing courses, such as a world language course or advanced mathematics, few eighth graders are enrolled in those courses. Academically, the majority of students face the concept of course credits for the first time when they enter ninth grade. The accumulation of credits with the realization that grades matter for high school graduation and college admission may take the average ninth-grade student some time to figure out. Additionally, some school systems offer an advanced diploma option for those students who are able to take more rigorous coursework and accumulate additional credits, not to mention successfully pass state-mandated exams. There is no doubt that students' ninth-grade year can cause and difficulties, such that attention to the transition to this critical year matters in the success of each and every student.

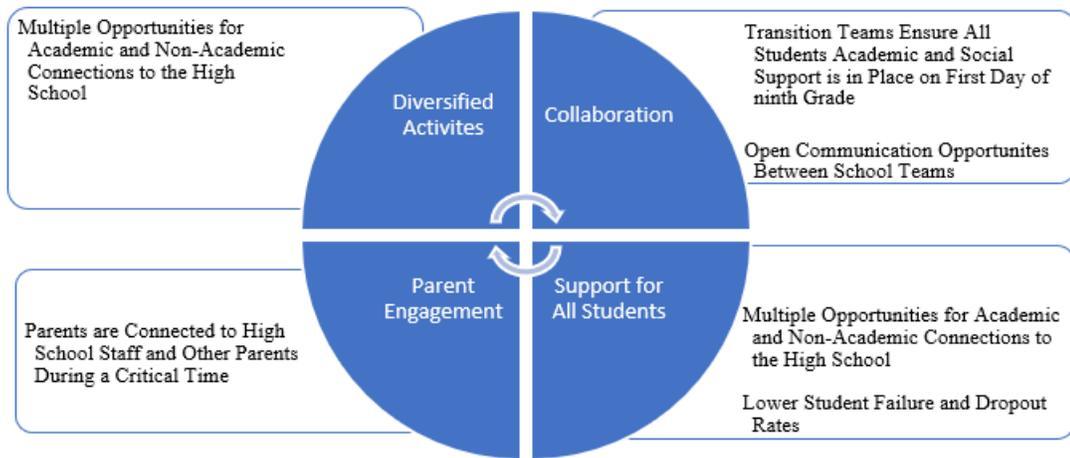
The combination of these factors makes the transition to high school much riskier than the transition to middle school. The course credit requirement leads to far too many students not completing ninth grade in 1 year, which leads to the "ninth-grade bulge" in many school systems where there are more students in ninth grade than eighth or 10th grade. The growing independence of ninth-graders also makes it more feasible for them to drop out of school to seek work or other activities. Often, difficulties in ninth grade lead students to drop out of school, so the two issues are linked.

Research indicates there are three areas that present challenges for students as they enter ninth grade, or the first year of high school: academic, procedural, and social (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000; Block, 2016; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ellerbrock, Denmon, & Owens, 2015; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006). Academic concerns include the need for students and their parents to understand the high school academic program, including expectations, homework, earning course credits, and grading systems. Procedural challenges occur as students are adjusting to their new environment and involve understanding the schedule, how to select new courses, and bell schedules. Students may experience anxiety when thinking about having enough time to travel from class to class, how to open their locker, and when or with whom they will be eating lunch on any given day. Social issues include making friends, participating in extracurricular activities and sports, and how to address bullies (Potter, Schliskey, Stevenson, & Drawdy, 2001). These challenges are unique to each student, but typically revolve around commonalities and can be connected to all students.

School leaders and school teams who recognize the need for targeted attention to the student transition between middle and high school can plan and provide for the support structures and programming needed by all students entering ninth grade. Studies have revealed that when schools have comprehensive transition programs embedded into their cultures, they have lower failure and dropout rates than schools with few or no articulation activities or programs (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

The adjustment to ninth grade is challenging for each student in his or her own way. Therefore, planning for the transition must include a concerted effort and input by

many stakeholders. Successful transition programs include diversified activities and support for students and parents, collaboration between middle school and high school staff, support for all students, and opportunities for increased parent engagement, as shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Components and benefits of successful middle school to high school transitions.

The goal of the transition team is to provide activities and programming that will cover a variety of topics to meet the needs of incoming ninth graders. Ultimately, transition teams want to ensure every rising ninth-grade student has met a teacher, counselor, or administrator at the high school and knows he or she can contact that person with any questions during the transition. The ability to connect with an identified staff member at the school will likely increase students’ confidence and security with the transition.

### **Diversified Activities**

Diversified activities provide families with multiple opportunities to connect with the high school staff regarding programs and activities for incoming students.

Opportunities may include early introductions to key staff, such as the school counselor, a teacher, or a grade-level administrator who would be available to answer questions during the summer months as they are preparing for the first day of high school. These introductions may occur during a ninth-grade “questions and answers” panel, high school principal talk, or by being assigned a high school student who can mentor the incoming ninth grader.

Another way transition teams can set up students for success is to consider a summer bridge program. Summer programs for incoming ninth-graders can vary in their design. For example, schools may offer incoming students 1 day to up to a week preview of the high school experience. This may look like the traditional summer school model with some added transition activities, it can be a preview of the ninth-grade core content, or it can be motivational and team building in nature. Simply, it is an opportunity for students to connect over the summer in their new school and to provide students with familiar staff and student faces to be able to connect with when needed.

### **Collaboration Between Middle School and High School Staff**

Middle school staff who develop relationships with their feeder high school staff can collaborate on distinct procedural or organizational differences ahead of time, as well as plan for the myriad needs students may have as they leave the comfort of the middle school environment and move to a new high school environment. Further, teams can review and use student data to determine what interventions may be needed to support students when faced with the increased rigor or workload they may experience in their high school courses.

The transition team structure allows for communication about their distinct social, academic, and organizational features to better prepare students for this transition (Smith et al., 2006). Educators at both levels accept the mutual responsibility of understanding the curriculum requirements to prepare and support student learners. Once students are assigned to a school counselor at the high school, the counselor serves as the conduit and point of contact for designing an individual plan for support and information dissemination to both students and their parents (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Middle school and high school teachers' collaboration and understanding of executive functioning skills needed at each level will support students with handling the increased academic rigor and homework expectations in high school. Teachers at both levels working together in an effort of understanding each grade level's expectations will allow students to ease into the increased expectations and curriculum requirements as they move from one grade level to the next.

Collaboration between staff can include programs that range from one-time informational assemblies to comprehensive monthly meetings among the transition team, which includes key staff from both schools (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Additionally, transition teams facilitate opportunities for student advisement sessions. This collaboration allows for deeper understanding of the students and the programming that may be needed to ensure students are appropriately placed and fully included in the school environment.

### **Support for All Students**

The high level of attention to ninth-grade students is an important component of successful transition programs. Students coming from middle school expect this level of

attention because middle schools typically assign students to teams, which creates a naturally supportive environment. The focus on supporting all students creates a “sense of community and belonging in the new school” (Anderson et al., 2000, p. 336).

Targeted programming to support all students includes an orientation to high school, information about sports teams and other extracurricular activities, a school tour, and individualized academic counseling when creating a course schedule. Many schools implement an advisory period, which creates personalized attention and closer relationships with an adult in the school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

### **Parent Engagement**

Outreach to parents, specifically, is critical to ensure a successful transition for students. Feeder middle schools and the receiving high school need to encourage a partnership with parents; parental participation in this process has a strong effect on student success in ninth grade (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Parent engagement is influenced by the actions of teachers, principals, and other staff and should be a priority for transition teams (Mac Iver, Epstein, Sheldon, & Fonseca, 2015). Targeted outreach to parents regarding student progress, attendance, and upcoming events supports the school and benefits student achievement.

School leaders must recognize that ninth grade is no doubt a time during which students face competing challenges in their lives. The transition from middle school to high school occurs during a period of development when there are increases in academic demands in a new school environment coupled with social integration factors, such as wanting to meet new friends or to participate in extracurricular activities. By providing multiple opportunities for academic and non-academic connections to high school for

both students and their parents, students are able to find a positive identity within the high school culture.

The development of a transition team with administrators, counselors, and teachers from both the middle school and high school, an explicit connection to a caring adult for the rising ninth-grader, and a concerted effort to engage parents as partners in the transition can set up students for success as shown through improved attendance, improved grades, and a high probability of graduating within 4 years.

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## **CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS**

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this research study confirmed my belief that when students enter ninth grade, they face many new demands and challenges in three areas: academic, procedural, and social. Though I found that Richard Samuel School developed a model that addressed all three challenge areas, further research on the transition to ninth grade should be conducted in comprehensive Grade 9 through 12 high schools, as well as in other school settings or configurations in which ninth grade is included. In doing so, the programmatic structure and embedded practices of transitioning students in these settings and configurations can be examined, compared, and affirmed as effective or ineffective practices of supporting students during this critical time.

Further research on the effective implementation of teacher advisories is also needed. Though research supports the need for students to achieve a connection to a teacher or staff member during the transition experience as a crucial component of success in the in the move from middle school to high school (Block, 2016; Erickson et al., 2013b; Smith, 2006), maintaining a 1:15 teacher–student ratio can present a challenge in staffing and the master schedule. School leaders must find alternative ways to support students’ sense of belonging and keeping students on track academically if a daily advisory period is not possible.

Finally, the engagement of parents during the transition to high school is another area that should be studied. The research on parent involvement in the early years of students’ development and schooling is abundantly clear that as students matriculate

between grade levels, parent involvement in school lessons, often times because schools' efforts to engage families decline (Mac Iver & Simmons, 2017).

### **Reflection**

This case study of Richard Samuel School confirmed that focusing on ninth grade matters if we want students to be successful and graduate on time with their grade-level peers. School leaders must be explicit and targeted with their planning of the ninth-grade experience. The development of a master schedule that allows for interdisciplinary teaming wherever possible provides students with the confidence in learning the content and strategies that can be planned and implemented across the curriculum.

Additionally, a master schedule that includes a teacher advisory period enables students to develop a relationship with at least one caring adult who will provide frequent check-ins on attendance, grades, and extracurricular engagement. Further, an advisory period allows for flexible groupings of students to receive additional academic or social-emotional support. Students are able to forge relationships with peers with whom they may or may not have attended middle school and develop confidence in making new friendships.

The creation of a summer bridge program between eighth and ninth grade can further build students' comfort and confidence level related to moving into high school. The development of a summer program to support the transition should include input from a variety of stakeholders, including staff from both the sending and receiving schools, administrators, school counselors, students' parents, and other community members.

In closing, my experiences as an elementary, middle, ninth grade, and high school principal have given me a unique perspective of transition, from preschool to graduation. I have seen transition practices in their infancy once the importance of the work is brought to school teams' attention and I have seen impactful transition programming that can change the trajectory of a student's life when done correctly. I am convinced that the development of school-based transition teams are a best practice in ensuring that each of our students is career and college ready when they graduate from high school.

So often our most vulnerable students are without advocates who can ensure they are provided with the best options of course offerings, whether for remediation or enrichment. It is the role of school teams across all levels to plan collectively for transition programming for each one of their students. The communication between school levels is vital when scheduling students and planning for their future. Last, the participation of the student and parents is vital in this work and should be included in every discussion regarding student placement or assignment in school. School teams must find ways to welcome and engage all families in the work of transition planning for students in order for it to be impactful for their child.

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## APPENDIX A: STUDY COVER LETTER AND INVITATION

November 20, 2018

Dear XXX:

I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. I am undertaking a dissertation study entitled, “Richard Samuel School: A Transition Program Model.” The purpose of my study will be to examine the programmatic structures created to address students’ academic, procedural and social concerns through the perceptions of former students, staff, and administrators.

I have received approval from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Institutional Review Board to conduct this study, as well approval as from the Chief Accountability Officer in the *Small Suburban Public Schools*. I would like to interview you about your perception of the effectiveness, benefits, and drawbacks regarding middle school to high school transition for all students at Richard Samuel School from its inception in 1993 until 2003. I will be asking you about your experience during this time. I will also be asking about the expectations of staff prior to and after the school configuration change. To complete the study, I would like to conduct a face-to-face interview with you at a mutually convenient time and location. I expect that the interview will take no more than one hour.

No identifying information linking you or your current position will be included in the data. Following the interview, if you choose, you will have the opportunity to read the transcription prior to it being used in the research. Should there be any information you would like revised or removed, you will have the opportunity to provide me with that guidance.

Please let me know via email or by telephone (703) XXX-XXXX by November 30, 2018 if you are willing and able to participate in my research. I hope to conduct this interview during the month of December 2018. This study is entirely voluntary. If you are unable to participate, please know that there will be no repercussions. Likewise, you are free to withdraw from this study at any time if you no longer wish to participate.

I look forward to your response. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

*Grace E. Taylor*

## APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### (School System Leaders & School Staff)

#### Research Questions:

- 1) What were the reasons for the development of Richard Samuel School's ninth grade transition program?
  - a. What structures were in place to address the academic concerns of students when transitioning from middle school to high school?
  - b. What structures were in place to address the procedural concerns of students when transitioning from middle school to high school?
  - c. What structures were in place to address the social concerns of students when transitioning from middle school to high school?
- 2) What changes between 1993 - 2003 occurred at Richard Samuel School to meet the needs of students and staff?
  - a. Why did these changes occur?
  - b. Did the changes accomplish the objectives underlying their implementation?
- 3) What were the perceptions of former students, staff, and administrators regarding the effectiveness of Richard Samuel School's ninth grade program?
  - a. What were the benefits of the Richard Samuel School's ninth grade transition program?
  - b. What were the drawbacks of Richard Samuel School's ninth grade transition program?

#### Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I'm excited about this opportunity and I look forward to learning more about Richard Samuel School. I am exploring the programmatic structures put in place to support students' transition to ninth grade. I am interviewing you today to identify the effectiveness, benefits, and drawbacks concerning middle school to high school transition for students at Richard Samuel School from 1993, when the school first opened until 2003.

#### *Start recording*

#### Opening Questions

Please state your name and your relationship to Richard Samuel School during the years of 1993-2003. How many years of experience do you have as an educator?

#### Content Questions

1. What led to the development of Richard Samuel School?
2. What were the challenges facing students as they transitioned from 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade?

- a. Probing questions: What structural changes were implemented when moving from a junior high model (grades 7-9) to a middle school/ninth grade model to address [academic, procedural and or social] challenges?
3. Prior to the school configuration change, what were the 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers' expectations in preparing students for high school transition?
4. After the school configuration change, how did the 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers expectations change in preparing students for high school transition? Did the changes accomplish the objectives underlying their implementation?
5. After the school configuration change, what were the expectations of Richard Samuel School's 9<sup>th</sup> grade teachers in preparing students for high school transition (grade 10-12)?
6. Did those expectations change for 9<sup>th</sup> grade teachers with the development of Richard Samuel School? If so, how did they change? Did the changes accomplish the objectives underlying their implementation?
  - a. *Probing questions:* Tell me more about that. What does "XXX" mean?
7. Is there any further information that you would like to share that we have not covered?

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for your time and for sharing your experience with me. If you have any questions, you know how to reach me. My contact information is on the consent form you signed at the beginning of this interview. Thank you again.

***Stop recording.***

## Semi-structured Interview Protocol (Students)

### Research Questions:

- 1) What were the reasons for the development of Richard Samuel School's ninth grade transition program?
  - a. What structures were in place to address the academic concerns of students when transitioning from middle school to high school?
  - b. What structures were in place to address the procedural concerns of students when transitioning from middle school to high school?
  - c. What structures were in place to address the social concerns of students when transitioning from middle school to high school?
- 2) What changes between 1993 - 2003 occurred at Richard Samuel School to meet the needs of students and staff?
  - a. Why did these changes occur?
  - b. Did the changes accomplish the objectives underlying their implementation?
- 3) What were the perceptions of former students, staff, and administrators regarding the effectiveness of Richard Samuel School's ninth grade program?
  - a. What were the benefits of the Richard Samuel School's ninth grade transition program?
  - b. What were the drawbacks of Richard Samuel School's ninth grade transition program?

### Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I'm excited about this opportunity and I look forward to learning more about Richard Samuel School. I am exploring the programmatic structures put in place to support students' transition to ninth grade. I am interviewing you today to identify the effectiveness, benefits, and drawbacks concerning middle school to high school transition for students at Richard Samuel School from 1993, when the school first opened until 2003.

### *Start recording*

### Opening Questions

Please state your name and your relationship to Richard Samuel School during the years of 1993-2003. What year were you enrolled at Richard Samuel School?

### Content Questions

1. What specific ways do you recall the program at Richard Samuel School making the transition to high school easier?
2. Did you have any concerns matriculating from 8<sup>th</sup> grade to ninth grade?
  - a. *Probing questions for academic concerns:*
    - Were you concerned about an increased workload at Richard Samuel School?
    - How were you feeling about high school readiness?

- How did Richard Samuel School create a positive learning environment?
  - Were you concerned about high school credit?
  - How did Richard Samuel School staff support your academic concerns?
- b. *Probing questions for procedural concerns:*
- How did you feel about moving to a new school?
  - What were your thoughts on rules and procedures at Richard Samuel School?
  - How did the Richard Samuel School staff support your procedural concerns?
- c. *Probing questions for social concerns:*
- How did you feel about a single grade level school and your ability to make friends?
  - Did Richard Samuel School promote social cohesion with your peers?
  - How did you feel about meeting new teachers and administrators?
  - Did Richard Samuel School promote strong relationships with teachers or other adults?
  - How did Richard Samuel School staff support your social concerns?

What structures do you recall were in place to support your matriculation to the high school?

- a. *Probing questions:* Tell me more about that. What does “XXX” mean?

7. Is there any further information that you would like to share that we have not covered?

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for your time and for sharing your experience with me. If you have any questions, you know how to reach me. My contact information is on the consent form you signed at the beginning of this interview. Thank you again.

***Stop recording.***

**APPENDIX C: TRAINING IN HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION**

**CERTIFICATE**



## APPENDIX D: RESEARCH SUBJECT CONSENT FORM

**Title:** Richard Samuel School: A Transition Program Model

**Protocol No.:** IRB # 18-981

**Sponsor:** Jennifer Farmer

Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University

**Investigator(s):** William J. Glenn, J.D., PH.D. (Primary Investigator)

Associate Professor, School of Education

Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University

7054 Haycock Road, Room 444

Falls Church, Virginia 22043

United States

Grace E. Taylor

**Daytime Phone Number(s):** (XXX) XXX-XXXX – Dr. William Glenn

(XXX) XXX-XXXX – Grace E. Taylor

You are being invited to take part in a research study. A person who takes part in a research study is called a research subject, or research participant.

### What should I know about this research?

- Someone will explain this research to you.
- This form sums up that explanation.
- Taking part in this research is voluntary. Whether you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
- If you don't understand, ask questions.
- Ask all the questions you want before you decide.

## **Why is this research being done?**

The purpose of this research is to contribute to the knowledge base of effective middle school to high school transition for all students. Specifically, the study is designed to lead the investigator to examine the reasons for the development and implementation of Richard Samuel School (RSS), a stand-alone ninth grade school in the *Small Suburban Public Schools* in a mid-Atlantic State. The case study will examine the first ten years of the school's existence, from 1993-2003. Further, it will identify the effectiveness, benefits, and drawbacks concerning the middle school to high school transition for all students at RSS.

The research will explore the programmatic structures to address students' academic, procedural, and social concerns from the perspectives of former students, staff and school system leaders. From this, the investigator intends to understand the relationship of programmatic structures to effective transition practices for students.

The study will involve data collection from about six participants: superintendent of schools during the creation of RSS; first principal of RSS; feeder high school principal; teacher; and two former students. Additionally, pertinent school and school system documents will be reviewed.

## **How long will I be in this research?**

We expect that your taking part in this research will last approximately one hour.

## **What happens to me if I agree to take part in this research?**

You, the participant, will be asked to sign an informed consent form prior to the collection of any data. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to provide demographic information regarding your role related to Richard Samuel School, from 1993-2003. This should take no more than 10 minutes. This information will be de-identified by the investigator.

Next, you will participate in a one-on-one interview with the investigator which will take no more than one hour. The interview will take place at date, time, and location that are mutually agreed upon by you and the investigator. You will be provided the interview protocol at least three days in advance of the interview. The interview will be scheduled during December 2018 or January 2019.

The remainder of the interview will explore your experiences at Richard Samuel School during the time period from 1993 to 2003. The interview will be recorded using a voice recorder and the investigator's computer.

A transcription will be made of the interview. All identifying information will be removed from the transcription. You will have the right to review the transcript and to provide the investigator

with any revisions such as omissions, clarifications, or additions to the interview, prior to the transcription being used for research. You will have 72 hours from the time you receive the transcription to provide revision to the investigator.

All data collected (including the transcription of your interview, audio recording of your interview, and documents created by the investigator from the data you provide) will be kept confidential by the investigator and will be retained for three years following the publication of the study. After that, the investigator will shred and destroy all hard copy documents and permanently delete all data collected and stored on technology.

### **What are my responsibilities if I take part in this research?**

If you take part in this research, you will be responsible for participating in an interview either in-person or by telephone. The interview will last approximately one hour.

### **Could being in this research hurt me?**

There is little to no risk to you to participate in this study. If, however, you experience any emotional distress during any part of this research and no longer wish to participate in the study, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

You may experience concerns about confidentiality. The investigator will not divulge your identity and data will de-identified by the investigator.

### **Will it cost me money to take part in this research?**

There is no cost to you in participating in this research.

### **Will being in this research benefit me?**

There are no benefits to you from your taking part in this research. We cannot promise any benefits to others from your taking part in this research. However, possible benefits include understanding made by the investigator from your data which will be published in a dissertation so that others can learn from the documentation and reflection of the structures in place at Richard Samuel School to support student transition from eighth to ninth grade.

### **What other choices do I have besides taking part in this research?**

Your alternative is to not take part in the research.

### **What happens to the information collected for this research?**

The information collected for this research may be used for publication and a dissertation. However, the data collected during this research will be conducted in a confidential

manner and your identity will be held in confidence by the investigator. Pseudonyms for people and places

will be used in the collection and reporting of results. Demographic and interview data will be de-identified and coded in ways only known to the investigator. Data and keys to such coding will be stored in a secured manner, in separate locations from one another. At no time will the investigator release identifiable results of the study to anyone. The Western Institutional Review Board (WIRB) may view the study's data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

We protect your information from disclosure to others to the extent required by law. We cannot promise complete secrecy.

### **Who can answer my questions about this research?**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think this research has hurt you or made you sick, talk to the research team at the phone number listed above on the first page.

This research is being overseen by an Institutional Review Board ("IRB"). An IRB is a group of people who perform independent review of research studies. You may talk to them at (800) 562-4789, [help@wirb.com](mailto:help@wirb.com) if:

- You have questions, concerns, or complaints that are not being answered by the research team.
- You are not getting answers from the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone else about the research.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.

### **What if I am injured because of taking part in this research?**

There is little to no risk to you to participate in this study. If, however, you experience any emotional distress during any part of this research and no longer wish to participate in the study, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

### **Can I be removed from this research without my approval?**

The person in charge of this research can remove you from this research without your approval. Possible reasons for removal include:

- It is in your best interest
- You have a side effect that requires stopping the research
- You are unable to keep your scheduled appointment after multiple attempts

We will tell you about any new information that may affect your choice to stay in this research.