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THE MIDDLE TO HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION: AN APPLIED RESEARCH STUDY TO
IMPROVE AND SUPPORT HIGH SCHOOL READINESS IN HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the Doctor of Education degree
in the Department of Educational Leadership
The University of Mississippi

by

Robert Davis II

May 2021

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ABSTRACT

The applied research study aimed to improve high school readiness for eighth-grade students transitioning to ninth-grade in high-poverty schools. Middle school educators are struggling to prepare students for ninth-grade without the proper transition support programs. This applied research study's framework was based on improving student performance, preventing academic achievement loss, addressing social-emotional learning, and informing students of operational procedures to prepare them for the high school environment. An action plan was developed and implemented in three phases to address each element of concern intentionally. Phase one consisted of Saturday Academy tutoring to improve student performance in reading and math. Implementation of phase two consisted of a structured mentoring initiative to provide social-emotional support around needed areas while also extrinsically motivating eighth-grade students to attend school regularly. Due to COVID-19, phase three was not implemented.

The mixed-methods applied research design utilized quantitative and qualitative data to support the program evaluation model. I sought to facilitate a collaborative effort to improve high school transition for eighth-grade students. Informal walk-through observations, student perception surveys, teacher focus groups, and student interviews were used in this study. According to the elements evaluated, the findings indicate Nurturing Experiences for Student Transition (NEST) improved high school readiness. The intended goals were met or exceeded, and the perception surveys added reliability to the methods used with the NEST Level Project.

DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation work to my loving family and many friends. Growing up in poverty and being a first-generation college kid made this seem like an impossible mission. Completing this work brings a unique feeling of gratitude to my loving parents, Robert and Earlean Davis, and in-laws, Willie and Linda Davis, whose words of affirmation and belief in me made this possible. To my brother Tyrone, sisters Terkessa and Syrita, and cousin Wren, you all have never left my side, and I am forever grateful.

I dedicate this dissertation to my beautiful wife, life partner, and best friend, KaShawna Davis. Also, to my loving children, Jalen, Cameron, and Raygan. These individuals have been my direct support system and allowed me to sacrifice time with them to pursue my dreams. I am so thankful for your patience, grace, and flexibility as you walked every step of this journey with me. You all have been there for me throughout the entire doctorate program and have been my biggest cheerleaders.

To my mentor, Dr. Joris M. Ray, you have always supported me and believed in my ability. Thank you for helping me develop my leadership skills and educational focus. To Cohort IV for the many hours of proofreading and motivation the past three years. This road has been a tough one to stay on; however, your tenacity to work as a team never wavered. Lastly, I dedicate this work to future African American males growing up in poverty, thinking they cannot make it. I am a living testimony that God will be there to guide you through whatever you set your mind to accomplish. Believe in yourself and never be afraid to fail. One who has never failed has never tried.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my committee members, who were more than generous with their expertise and precious time. A special thanks to Dr. Douglas Davis, my committee chairman, for his countless hours of reflecting, reading, encouraging, and most of all, patience throughout the entire process. Thank you, Dr. Jill Cabrera-Davis, Dr. Angus Mungal, Dr. Mandy Perryman, and Dr. Joris M. Ray, for agreeing to serve on my committee. I also would like to acknowledge and thank my school district for allowing me to conduct my research. Finally, I would like to thank the administrators, counselors, teachers, students, and community stakeholders in my school district that assisted me with this project. Their excitement and willingness to provide feedback made the completion of this research an enjoyable experience.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

As a student, beginning high school can feel like being in a maze full of strangers who possess the skills to exit; however, you are trapped without any knowledge to escape successfully. Despite the more extensive facilities, unfamiliar faces, and anxiety concerning academic success, students are determined to navigate through high school and graduate on time with a high school diploma. I can vividly remember my first day of ninth-grade, walking onto a relatively large campus, taking a deep breath to calm my nerves, and opening the door to a new endeavor. I could smell the scent of loose-leaf paper, pencils, and erasers as the assistant principal directed me to the auditorium. Walking with my head bowed, I could see my reflection on the floors. With sweaty palms and trembling legs, I entered with reservations and thoughts about successfully navigating my first day of high school. I wondered if students would ridicule me for not wearing the latest fashion or if I could even make new friends. Any doubts I had over the Summer about future academic success were magnified times ten in my thoughts. There was no one around to comfort me throughout the beginning stages of this significant transition.

The previously cited factors symbolize the academic, procedural, and social-emotional challenges around high school readiness many students experience when moving from eighth to ninth-grade. My experience could be similar to those in high-poverty schools all over the country. Chapter One will outline the problem, provide context around the problem, and give the study's significance with improving high school readiness throughout the middle to high school transition.

Statement of the Problem

According to Cooper and Markoe-Hayes (2005), students who have a difficult time adjusting to the academic and social demands of high school also experience higher rates of academic failure, disciplinary problems, feelings of not belonging, and dropping out. The ninth-grade transition is challenging for many students as courses are typically more rigorous, schools are more extensive, and social concerns are more complex than previously experienced. Behavior problems usually increase while academic proficiency begins to decline. A student is three to five times more likely to fail a class in ninth-grade than any other grade level throughout their K-12 education (Warren et al., 2011). The single most predictive indicator of high school dropout is the student's academic standing during the ninth-grade (Williamston, 2010). Low-achieving students are not the only individuals affected by these factors. According to Roderick (2006), 37% of previously high-achieving students in eighth-grade but not on-track in ninth-grade did not graduate high school within four years or on time. High-achieving, low-income students fall out of the top achievement quartile twice the rate of high-achieving, high-income students (Wyner et al., 2007). However, twice as many high-achieving, low-income students fail to graduate on time compared to their high-achieving, high-income counterparts.

Because of the difficulty, many students encounter during their ninth-grade year; feeder middle schools must work with receiving high schools to prepare students for a successful transition into ninth-grade. However, many school districts lack a formalized transition program that addresses the academic, procedural, and social concerns that eighth-grade students have regarding the transition to high school. The research identified the first year of high school being one of the most pivotal years to student success; however, the transition to high school has been

plagued with a decline in grades and attendance (Warren et al., 2011). Students chronically absent in ninth-grade will fail one or more courses and be three times less likely to complete high school (Warren et al., 2011). Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) and other studies have been conducted on the transitions between elementary to middle school and high school to post-secondary institutions. There appears to be a significant gap in the literature regarding the transition from middle to high school in high poverty, urban schools.

Description of the Context

I currently serve as principal at E.W. Diggs Academy (EWDA), a K-8 school located in Tennessee's largest urban school district. Diggs Academy is in the lowest socioeconomic area in the city. The school is surrounded by blight, while several neighboring streets are lined with abandoned properties. According to Data USA (2020), the town is comprised of 176,000 residents living below the poverty line (\$24,858) with a family of four, for a total of 27% of the population living in poverty. When observing this from the children's perspective, 40,000 students live in homes with families earning less than \$10,000 a year, which makes up a 39% child poverty rate. Mirroring the national average, 84% of residents have a high school diploma.

The school serves approximately 175 students, of which 98.4% are African American, and 1.6% are Hispanic, Caucasian, or Asian. Of the students at EWDA, 97.1% are economically disadvantaged, receiving free/reduced lunch with limited access to resources. According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2020), the TN Ready state assessment three-year trend data reveals only 13% of students are on-track for mastering grade-level reading standards to be considered academically ready for high school. When ending the 2017-2018 school year, 0% of students were on track for mastering grade-level reading standards, and only 6.5% of students

mastered grade-level standards in reading the previous school year. The remaining 74.6% of eighth-grade students are approaching grade-level standards, while 12.4% of students perform below grade-level standards. Below standards equates to students being at least one grade-level behind in reading upon entering high school. Eighth-grade students have the highest rate of chronic absenteeism, with this trend continuing to rise across several schools in the city. The school district's graduation rate is 79.2%, with many students failing coursework in their freshman year of high school. If this trend continues, only 24 of 30 eighth-grade students leaving EWDA will graduate on time in 2024.

Because EWDA is a magnet school and students choose to be there, they often attend three local high schools in various locations throughout the city. All three schools are in very diverse neighborhoods, with an average household income of \$58,000 per year for a family of four (Data USA, 2020). This is well above the city's average and significantly higher than the community in which students at EWDA reside. This creates an additional layer of anxiety when students worry about being appropriately dressed, ridiculed, or only unsuitable to attend school with students of such diverse backgrounds. Students should be positively impacted socially and emotionally by the culture and climate of the larger school environments; however, it's typically quite the opposite.

While students may experience a series of transitions in their lifetime, for eighth-grade students in urban school districts and high-poverty neighborhoods, the transition to high school can be a very intimidating and daunting task. Students carry high anxiety levels in most cases, which influences them in a multitude of ways. Existing school transition research indicated academic achievement and student engagement significantly declining as students move from middle to high school; however, there is little research regarding why students in urban, high-

poverty communities experience more academic loss. A more in-depth understanding must be obtained to comprehend the three components of high school readiness: procedural competencies, social-emotional deficits, and educational sustainability for urban students in poverty. The research revealed how effective transition programs and practices are needed to aid ninth-grade students with socio-emotional controversy, achievement loss, falling graduation rates, and growing dropout rates throughout the city.

Justification of the Problem

As students begin high school one grade-level behind without implementing a transition program, they are more likely to not graduate in four years, while those two or more grade levels back are more likely to drop out of high school before their senior year (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013). Middle school educators struggle to prepare students for ninth-grade without the proper transition support programs and collaboration with feeder high schools. According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2020) state assessment data, 0% of students at EWDA were on track with grade-level reading standards. However, these students are currently attending high schools throughout the school district and performing below grade-level standards.

The three-year trend at EWDA shows eighth-grade students scoring less than mastery (below 50%) on the state assessment and below grade level (below 25%) on common district assessments. In 2016, 6.5% of students scored above 50% on grade-level standards, with 0% scoring mastery in 2017 and 2018. However, 74.6% are approaching mastery (between 26%-49%) of standards on the state assessment. This data directly impacts students leaving middle school and transitioning into high school level content. Students are not graduating with their original cohort in the school district, with a graduation rate of 79.2%. Only 77.3% of Economically Disadvantaged students are graduating on time, and when factoring in high

poverty areas, the rate is significantly lower. For every four in five students, one is left behind and will not graduate within four years with their cohort. The district has a strategic goal for 90% of students to graduate on time by 2025. For students to graduate on time, they must be prepared when entering high school in ninth-grade. There are many factors to consider when looking at the data and finding the root cause. Students in the eighth-grade at EWDA have shared the same teacher yet a different curriculum over the last three years. Looking at teacher development as a factor can mean one thing, while viewing the difference in curriculum, scope, and pacing can represent another. Throughout this applied research study, I focused on middle school students being prepared for secondary education and how low academic achievement, along with chronic absenteeism, can affect graduation rates as early as eighth-grade.

Students who populate on the chronically absent list fall into the approaching or below standards range on state assessments, but this is not a testament to what a student can accomplish. As a school, EWDA performed at a level 2 in achievement and a level 1 for growth according to the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS). As explained by the Tennessee Department of Education (2020), TVAAS compares a student's growth performance to their peers who performed similarly on past assessments. This was relevant because a student must make an entire year's worth of growth relative to their peers experiencing the same transition. Students at EWDA made minimal growth leaving the eighth-grade, impacting high school readiness, graduation, and students seeking post-secondary options. This requires intense research to explore student performance for over three years. There is a keen focus on teacher development and professional development with the curriculum while also dissecting environmental factors such as chronic absenteeism and reading proficiency. By ensuring all students have a competent teacher and proper support, we will prepare them for high school

graduation and post-secondary options according to the district's strategic plan to meet the 2025 goal.

Significance of the Study

Despite millions of federal dollars invested in research for students at risk of dropping out of high school, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimated over half a million students had left school before graduation (Seastrom, Hoffman, Chapman, & Stillwell, 2005). Unfortunately, this increase in the dropout rate has occurred when there seems to be such a large emphasis on getting a college degree, much less a high school diploma, and competing in a global society (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007). According to the US Department of Education, high school completion rates are at an all-time high. The NCES reported the average graduation rate to be 78.2%, meaning nearly four out of five students earned their high school diploma within four years after beginning their ninth-grade year (NCES, 2014). This directly correlates with the school district's graduation rate (79.2), only showing a 1% difference. Despite these numbers for high school graduates, one in every five students who begin high school in the United States fails to graduate on time. Rates have been steady over the years and have not shown any shift.

According to Neild, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007), it is practically impossible for individuals lacking a high school diploma to earn a living or participate meaningfully in civic life. The failure to earn a high school diploma translates into low-paying jobs, unemployment, poor health, and poverty. Furger (2008) revealed in the past decade that 6.4% of high school dropouts, ages 25 and older, were unemployed, compared to only 3.5% of those with a high school diploma. The median annual income for a male high school dropout in 2013 was \$30,570 compared to \$40,290 for a high school graduate (NCES, 2014). A high school graduate's lifetime

income is almost double that of a high school dropout, with a graduate earning close to \$290,000 more throughout their tenure in the workforce (Belfield & Levin, 2007). The school district currently operates 60 high schools, with 56 middle schools transitioning eighth-grade students, impacting their ninth-grade success. Having successful transition programs and practices would positively impact numerous stakeholders across the city and the school district.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this applied research study was to improve high school readiness for eighth-grade students transitioning to ninth-grade by increasing academic proficiency in reading and math while simultaneously decreasing chronic absenteeism. A collaborative team performed an analysis of state accountability data, discovering trends in academic performance and attendance. A review of research identified three key areas in which efforts to improve the middle to high school transition should focus. My research design included a collaborative approach to enhance high school readiness amongst eighth-grade students. This applied research study's framework was based on improving student performance, preventing academic achievement loss, addressing social-emotional learning, and informing students of procedures to prepare them for the high school environment better. An action plan was developed to be implemented in three phases to address each element of concern intentionally. Phase one consisted of Saturday Academy tutoring to improve student performance in reading and math. Implementation of phase two consisted of a structured mentoring initiative to provide social-emotional support around needed areas while also extrinsically motivating eighth-grade students to attend school regularly. Due to COVID-19, the summer bridge program was not implemented. Although this was a part of my research, the proper adjustments were made to exclude this element; however, it is discussed in later sections dedicated to future research implications.

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected to support the program evaluation model, as I sought to facilitate a collaborative effort to improve high school transition for eighth-grade students. Teachers participated in a focus group to provide their perceptions and experiences with students transitioning to high school. Students' perceptions were gathered through interviews to determine how they felt about making this significant transition. After continuous monitoring for efficient implementation and review of formative assessment data, the team reconvened to evaluate our transition program's impact on academic growth and attendance. The stress frequently associated with middle to high school transition is linked to decreased academic achievement and school attendance, with approximately 50% of students disengaged from school by freshman year (Johnson, Simon & Mun, 2014). The transition to a new educational setting requires major adaptations, which can be pretty overwhelming for students. Particularly challenging is the transition from middle to high school, when adolescents struggle with procedural processes to navigate new facilities, making social-emotional adjustments, and experiencing a decline in academic performance. Although this applied research study was designed to focus on academic performance and attendance with eighth-grade students, the study's impact also improved classroom engagement and discipline across EWDA.

Research Questions

This applied research study was guided by five research questions, addressing three elements, process, and output goals. These questions provided information about the process of eighth-grade students transitioning to high school, dealing with a decline in academic performance and attendance, social-emotional learning, and procedural troubles to navigate high school correctly. Questions one and two surveyed the process goals around tutoring, in correlation with the output goal of 5% improvement on the benchmark assessment. Question

three measured the effectiveness of the mentoring initiative while analyzing its relationship with attendance. The last two questions gathered student and teacher perceptions on transition practices, which was utilized to adjust the program's overall effectiveness and efficiency for each element. Teacher and student perceptions were evaluated to explore the program's success. Student interviews and teacher focus groups were the basis for qualitative data used. Data analysis and triangulation were used to develop the action plan presented in Chapter 3. The action plan's goals were designed to pursue more information and document our successful transition practices efforts. Consequently, this applied research study assessed the implementation process to identify efficient strategies. Based on the problem of practice, the following set of research questions were used to evaluate the results of the action plan:

1. Did benchmark data in reading and math increase by 5% for eighth-grade students transitioning to high school after Saturday Academy participation?
2. What impact did the Saturday Academy have on reading and math outcomes measured by the TN Ready state assessment?
3. To what extent did the GAP initiative improve chronic absenteeism for students transitioning to ninth-grade?
4. What is student perception of high school readiness when making the transition to high school?
5. What is teacher perception of high school readiness for students transitioning to high school?

Overview of the Study

Students at E.W. Diggs Academy needed experience with effective transition practices according to previous data and available research. Our students were struggling with the

transition to high school, and we revealed how. This study set out to understand their experiences and how best to support the transition to high school. In Chapter One, this study established the need for improving the transition from middle to high school by addressing three key elements to guide the study. Chapter Two provides relevant research exploring effective transition practices and what key components make up the most successful programs. Chapter Three presents the action plan's collaborative development, relevant research, implementation efforts, and evaluation methods for the project. Chapter Four will present an analysis of the study's evaluation results, while Chapter Five will present the conclusions and future implications for further research and recommendations for continuous improvement.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Each year, thousands of young adolescents make the crucial transition from middle to high school. As they do so, they often look forward to their new school experience with apprehension. They worry that older students will tease or harass them, that they will get lost in their new school's hallways, that schoolwork will be more demanding and more time-consuming, and those high school teachers will not help them as much as their middle school teachers (Mizelle, 2005). The social-emotional stress frequently associated with middle to high school transition is linked to decreased academic achievement and school attendance, with approximately 50% of students disengaged from school by the end of freshman year (Johnson, Simon & Mun, 2014). The transition to a new educational setting requires major adaptations, which can be pretty overwhelming for students. Mizelle (2005) predicts that in school settings where students continue to feel stressed, alone, and incompetent, their sense of self-worth may plummet, grades may drop, and they may stop attending school regularly, eventually dropping out. This literature review will reflect how effective transition practices can assist with academic performance, social-emotional support, and high school retention as students make that leap into high school. Furthermore, my research helped develop a transition program plan of action to increase student achievement and attendance before the ninth-grade transition.

This literature review is divided into three sections: (a) Examining risk factors and the impact of typical middle to high school transition practices; (b) The achievement loss associated with transitions; (c) Documentation of efforts to improve eighth to ninth grade transitions. This applied research study documented my practice as I sought to facilitate a

collaborative effort to increase academic achievement and eighth-grade students' attendance at E.W. Diggs Academy. The research was done on improving reading outcomes, math outcomes, and chronic absenteeism. Nurturing Experiences for Student Transitions (NEST) was designed to enhance overall high school readiness throughout the middle to high school transition.

Examining Risk Factors and the Impact of Common Transition Practices

Given the increased risk factors in the transition from middle school to high school, there is a growing concern about students' continuous decline in academic performance, along with rapidly increasing dropout rates from low attendance. McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, and Cochrane (2008) tracked academic and school discipline records for students receiving general and special education services as they transitioned from eighth to ninth-grade. Throughout this study, the authors employed analysis of variance and structural equation modeling to determine the significance and strength of the relationship between academic skills and behavior variables. The research involved a small but growing school district in the Pacific Northwest, with a total K-12 enrollment of 5,542 students. The district has implemented and sustained both school-wide positive behavior supports and a school-wide reading improvement model over the last ten years with documented effectiveness of both programs. To provide a large-scale indication of problem behavior, the authors used office discipline referrals. To assess academic skills, the authors used the Oregon State Assessment reading test; however, an indication was derived from individual student grade point averages for academic performance. The analyses showed statistically significant links between problem behavior in grade eight and academic performance in grade nine, academic skills in grade eight, and problem behavior in grade nine. The crossover effects from behavior to academics were significant even when the model controlled for direct effects. These results provide a unique view of the relationship between academics and behavior during

this crucial time and point to the need for interventions that address academic skills as a tool to prevent dropout.

In a correlating study, Mckee and Caldarella (2016) conducted a case study to identify early dropout risk indicators in middle school to help schools retain students during the pivotal first semester of ninth-grade. The likelihood of dropping out is attributed to both social and academic risk factors. This study's three leading risk indicators were poor high school attendance, low course completion, and a low grade-point average (GPA). The authors also note that early indication of at-risk high school students is critical during the first semester of ninth-grade. This study utilized a single case study design with embedded quantitative statistical analyses to understand the characteristics of 416 students transitioning from three middle schools to a large suburban high school. Regression analyses were used to examine the relationship of 12 middle school indicators to ninth-grade attendance, course completion, and grade point average. Findings indicated that middle school GPA, grades, attendance, and ACT math scores were strong predictors of ninth-grade performance. These middle school risk indicators impact ninth-grade students at-risk of school failure early and provide interventions during their first high school year.

In a contrasting study of risk factors and quantitative measures, Clemons (2018) conducted a qualitative exploratory case study to identify at-risk students' challenges and needs during the transition from middle to high school (i.e., eighth to ninth grade). The author reviewed data from the teachers' perspectives to identify similarities between eighth and ninth-grade teachers' views to promote collaboration of supports and strategies that address the identified challenges. The middle to high school transition has been recognized as one of the most challenging changes for students. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Urie Bronfenbrenner's

Bioecological Theory of Development, and the Life Course Theory guided the study, which considers an individual's background and its effects on their future functioning. A five-question survey, in which participants responded to 4 questions, was posted on Survey Exchange via Facebook. A total of 12 participants: eight eighth-grade teachers and four ninth-grade teachers, responded to 3 semi-structured, open-ended questions and one additional feedback section. Constant comparison analyses were utilized, and items were assessed one at a time. Results emerging in this study indicated a need for academic and social and emotional supports throughout the eighth and ninth-grade. Increased parental engagement throughout eighth-grade, exposure to high school structures, better communication between receiving high schools, learning essential skills to include time management, and peer mentors throughout freshman year are vital components to a successful transition. Middle and high schools that implement effective transition programs have more positive results with transitioning at-risk students. According to this study, schools with a higher risk population should implement such supports immediately.

Deriving from a research study conducted by McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) was a theory concerning graduation rates being one of the most troubling concerns following high school transitions. Despite millions of federal dollars invested in research on students at-risk for dropping out of high school, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020) estimated that half a million students over the last decade had left school before graduation (Seastrom, Hoffman, Chapman, & Stillwell, 2005). Unfortunately, this increase in the dropout rate has occurred when there seems to be such a large emphasis on getting a college degree, much less a high school diploma, and competing in a global society (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007). The authors examined two factors associated with decreased graduation rates and increased high school dropout when conducting this research. These factors include increased

graduation requirements and a rocky transition from middle school to high school. Increased graduation requirements and rocky transitions from middle school to high school seem to comprise many reasons for students struggling, failing, and dropping out. Since high school graduation requirements and the transition to high school both involve the ninth-grade, a great deal of research has focused on the importance of freshman year. Solutions to help ease the transition to high school, including the development of freshman academies, are underway to boost freshman success and reduce high school dropout rates. Findings indicate with increasing demands in high school, ninth-graders have the lowest grade point average and the highest enrollment. Approximately 22% of students repeat ninth-grade classes (Fritzer and Herbst, 1996). Researchers at Johns Hopkins University have found that up to 40% of ninth-grade students in cities with the highest dropout rates repeat the ninth-grade, but only 10% to 15% of those repeaters go on to graduate (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

Researchers continue to reveal that the transition from middle to high school can be scary for some students. A review of effective transition programs promoting student success by Roybal et al. (2014) indicated that first-year high school students fail at an alarming rate. In a general sense, high schools' environments, expectations, structure, and culture are different from those of middle schools. However, school leaders can implement transition programs that may promote the success of ninth-graders. Middle school and high school leaders can work together to facilitate student success. The article provides a discussion around the issues related to this transition and offers a review of recommendations.

Isakson and Jarvis (1999) studied students' adjustments when they moved from eighth to ninth grade. These authors discovered that attendance increased significantly toward the end of the eighth-grade year and the beginning of the ninth-grade school year, but attendance dropped

after that. Stressors were the highest during the middle of the freshman year, but they decreased by the end of the year. The investigators ascertained that the higher the number of stressors a student reported, the lower the school membership level; however, when support from parents or friends increased, stressors decreased, and school membership increased. Social-emotional support is a huge factor in making significant transitions as well. Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) identified seven themes related to the transition from middle to high school: the role of peers; school supportive strategies and activities; challenges due to unfamiliar processes and procedures; changes in the scope of learning activities; confidence and success of students; homework issues; and roles of teachers. The authors found that friendships are essential to students; when ninth-grade students enter high schools, they lose some relationships but develop others as they become acclimated in high school.

Achievement Loss Associated with Transitions

Alspaugh (1998) conducted a study to explore the nature of achievement loss associated with school transition from elementary to middle school to high school. This ex post facto study's primary goal was to examine the heart of the achievement loss associated with transitioning to a middle school and transitioning to high school. Second, the goal was to determine if there is a relationship between school-to-school transitions and the percentage of students who drop out of high school. The author compared three groups of 16 school districts in this ex post facto study to 48 districts. The first group of districts had K-8 and 9-12 grade level organizations. The second group consisted of schools with one elementary, middle, and high school. The final group contained three elementary schools, one middle, and one high school with a pyramid transition arrangement of multiple elementary schools feeding into one middle school. For the first part of the investigation, the dependent variable was the difference between

the district average student achievement scores. The difference scores represent the achievement loss associated with the transition from elementary to middle school. The second part contains a two-way analysis of achievement loss variance with repeated measures on the academic area to transition from elementary to middle school in sixth grade. For the transition to ninth-grade, the same academic area measures were analyzed for the difference between eighth to ninth-grade achievement. Results indicated that students attending traditional middle schools experienced a more significant achievement loss in the transition to high school than did the students transition from a K-8 school. The experience of making a previous transition did not moderate the achievement loss during the transition to high school; however, the findings in this study imply that students were encountering the double-jeopardy situation previously anticipated. This research also identified the loss of self-esteem and self-perception contributed to the increased dropout rates. Students attending larger schools tend to experience more transitions than students in smaller schools, ultimately impacting student achievement and attendance. Schools with two transitions had a higher dropout rate than those with one. Fewer transitions for students can have implications for students remaining in high school through graduation.

Given the implications of students missing graduation when experiencing such achievement loss, there must be proper measures to combat further issues. To help prevent the dropout resulting in such problems, measures of school risk factors associated with high school dropouts, such as absenteeism and low student achievement, should be integrated into early warning and intervention systems (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox, 2010). Bowers, Spratt, and Tafif (2013) conducted a study, performing a literature review on the most accurate indicators of students at-risk of dropping out of high school. The purpose was to highlight, encourage, and provide an example of the usefulness of offering accuracy measures across the

dropout indicator research. This research helped the authors move the field towards a more consistent reporting structure. The authors used the Relative Operating Characteristic (R.O.C.) analysis to compare the sensitivity and specificity of 110 dropout flags across 36 studies. They then recorded the reported numbers from each manuscript. Of note, none of the studies correctly reported all three calculations of precision, sensitivity, and specificity. Many studies said the overall sample size and then variations on the percentages of dropout students with the dropout indicator or students with the indicator dropped out. Results indicate that 1) R.O.C. analysis provides a means to compare the accuracy of different dropout indicators, 2) most dropout flags to date have high precision yet lack accuracy, 3) longitudinal growth models provided the most accurate flags, while 4) the most accurate cross-sectional flags examine low or failing grades. The study encourages more work in this area. Seeing the results suggest that poor and failing grades, especially when coupled with a low number of high school credits, are some of the most accurate indicators of students at risk of dropping out.

Fulk (2003) indicated that the following interventions have been effective: planning sessions between middle schools and high school teachers; involvement of parents in high school activities; Assistance for students with homework during tutoring sessions; incentive programs for attendance, grades, and citizenship; systems to earn credit each semester or each quarter; Block schedules for core classes; closed campus; Small learning communities; and celebrations of student successes. He later described an example of an action plan designed to create an environment that would promote ninth-grade students' academic success. The school started a Freshman Focus Group comprised of teachers, administrators, and university faculty. The group implemented a three-stage action plan. The four top concerns of teachers were: flawed study and test-taking skills, poor organizational and time management skills; non-motivation for school and

a lack of student concern about grades; and a low homework completion rate. The researchers recommended that proactive steps be taken: visits to schools with transition programs in place; expanded collaboration with feeder middle schools; faculty training on areas identified as the greatest need, such as how to teach test-taking skills and note-taking; peer mentors; decrease homeroom enrollment size; summer orientation for incoming ninth-graders; student planners; and tutoring provided by university students.

Documentation of Efforts to Improve Eighth to Ninth-Grade Transition

Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) conducted a research study to prove a full transition program is needed to address the areas necessary for new ninth-grade students to succeed in their transition to high school. Top transition programs work for students "only when the school provides complete support." The purpose of this article was to share school research that studied the factors perceived by students as having the most significant influence regarding their transition from eighth grade to ninth grade. Students at a large comprehensive Midwestern high school completed a survey in which they rated the items they believed helped them find success at the ninth-grade level. The subjects for this study were students who entered the ninth grade for the first time at a large Midwest comprehensive high school with a student population of approximately 2300, grades 9-12. The population consisted of 78.3 % Caucasian, 16.7% Native American, and 1.7% each for African American, Asian American, and Hispanic American students. Approximately twenty-three percent (22.9%) of the high school students received free and reduced lunch. Within the district, three middle schools send their students to one of two high schools. The core subjects included language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. One of the middle schools had reading as a core subject area. For this study, each new ninth-grade student completed a survey in a classroom setting monitored by a teacher. The survey was

based on a selected literature review. The survey's focus was to identify areas with the most significant influence on student success in the ninth-grade as perceived by the students. Once the surveys were collected by the researcher, an analysis of the data was made. Students were asked to respond to thirty questions with a scale choice that included the following: 1) really doesn't help; 2) doesn't help; 3) helps; 4) really helps. They were also asked to respond to the one yes or no item ("I feel I'm being successful.") and one open-ended question. The question asked, "What did you need the most (and did not get) to help you make the transition to ninth grade?" Results indicate helpful factors included having teachers who explained things well, having an interest in the class, having friends in class, and going to class daily. Factors that were not helpful for success included limiting time with friends, having a mentor, having tutors help with work, being in a larger school, and forgetting outside problems.

With peer support having a considerable impact on mentorship, Johnson, Simon, and Yung Mun (2014) conducted a randomized, four-year longitudinal study of the effects on student outcomes of Peer Group Connection (PGC). PGC is a high school transition program that leverages older high school students' potential leadership skills to provide instruction and facilitation to groups of 12-14 ninth-grade students. During the critical transition from middle to high school, academic achievement, school attendance, and student behavior frequently decline (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). While the overall study investigated PGC's impact on various student outcomes, this report focuses on the four-year cohort graduation rates of randomly assigned students to participate in either the PGC program or a control group during their ninth-grade year. Participants were 268 ninth-grade students (133 females; 135 males) from a low-income, Mid-Atlantic urban high school. Most of the participants were Latino/Hispanic (92%), followed by "other" (6%) and African-American (2%). All ninth-grade students completed a baseline

survey before program participation in September 2005 (N=269) and a post-program survey in May 2006 (N =253). Follow-up surveys were administered to all continuing students in May of their sophomore (N= 200) and junior (N=168) years. Survey results show no statistical differences on key baseline measures between students who did not complete the follow-up assessments compared to those who did; therefore, any potential attrition bias was deemed negligible. In June 2009, a list of graduating students in the study (N=190) was obtained from the school.

Results show that PGC improves participants' graduation rates by nine percentage points (77% of the program group graduated from high school compared to only 68% in the control group). To monitor the program's fidelity, trained observers conducted observations of the instructional classes with the peer leaders, freshman outreach classes, and the sophomore booster sessions. Attendance was recorded at the freshman outreach classes and booster sessions. Analyses of fidelity data indicated that the teacher-advisors' overall effectiveness was rated as "excellent" or "good" in 13 of 15 observations. Observer ratings of the peer leaders' overall effectiveness in the outreach sessions indicated 89% rated as satisfactory or above. These results suggest that program fidelity was maintained. The results of this study show that CSS's Peer Group Connection program significantly improves student graduation rates. The program dramatically impacted males' graduation rates, with 81% of the males in the program group graduating from high school in four years compared to 63% of males in the control group graduating within the same time frame. While the present study results indicated no difference in graduation rates for females in the program group than the control group, previous research findings suggest PGC positively impacts other outcomes among females. Results show that PGC

improves participants' graduation rates by nine percentage points (77% of the program group graduated from high school compared to only 68% in the control group).

While examining programs for significant transition and retention, Somers, Owens, and Piliawsky (2009) conducted a study describing the results of a research evaluation of a school dropout prevention program and adolescents' self-reported perceptions of their motivations and role models. The plan was a partnership between an urban university and an urban school district designed to prevent ninth-grade students from dropping out of high school. It included tutoring, personal development, summer enrichment, and parental involvement. Students in this district are at significant risk of dropping out of school. The four-year graduation rate from ninth-grade to 12th grade was approximately 50%, compared to a statewide graduation rate of 76 percent. This study's participants were 140 ninth-grade public high school students in a major urban city in the Midwest. Seventy-five of the students were in the experimental group. They elected to participate in the tutoring/mentoring experiences. A group of 65 ninth-graders in the same school were randomly selected as the comparison group. The sample was approximately half male and half female, 99% African-American, and primarily low income. Achievement and Grade Point Average (GPA), calculated on a 4.0 scale, was used to measure academic performance. GPA was logged at five points in time: End of eighth-grade, October of ninth-grade, January of ninth-grade, April of ninth-grade, and June of ninth-grade. Adolescents also answered open-ended narrative questions about their perceptions of what careers they ideally and realistically would like to have and who their role models are. Results revealed that the underlying assumption of homogeneity of variance was not violated. However, there were no significant differences between the two groups over the school year regarding the amount of progress made for GPA. An examination of descriptive statistics for GPA revealed additional information. Both groups

experienced a decrease in GPA between the end of eighth-grade and the beginning of ninth grade; however, both groups slowly made gradual improvements in GPA by the end of the ninth-grade.

Conclusion

Many strategies are available to promote a successful transition to high school; however, research indicates that one or two methods are not sufficient to meet all students' needs. A successful transition program must be a comprehensive program that incorporates numerous strategies (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Research supports the implementation of transition programs, and the lack of them causes significant achievement loss during the transition from eighth to ninth grade (Alspaugh, 1998). Over the past two years, 100% of eighth-grade students at E.W. Diggs Academy performed below proficiency on the TN Ready state assessment while continuing to enter the ninth-grade unprepared academically and socially-emotionally. This finding is of significant concern and has implications for graduation and dropout rates across the district. Throughout the community, trends suggest only 76% of students leaving eighth-grade will graduate on time, while many of the remaining 24% never complete high school. The district's strategic plan and goal for 2025 suggest that 90% of students will graduate on time. Effective transition and dropout prevention programs are needed to minimize achievement loss, support social-emotional learning, and increase students' attendance entering the ninth-grade. While furthering my research, I documented ways to improve middle to high school transitions to promote academic growth and achievement. My applied research study helped develop a transition program for eighth-grade students transitioning to high school. The purpose was to increase student achievement on the TN Ready state assessment, decrease chronic absenteeism, and show the relationship between the program and my findings.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

Introduction

The transition to a new educational setting requires major adaptations, which often become quite overwhelming for students. This chapter will present an applied research study to examine how effective transition practices can assist with high school readiness and retention. Elements within my applied research study addressed achievement loss, social-emotional learning, and procedural knowledge associated with transitions. When action planning, Saturday Academy tutoring for academic achievement and growth was developed, and a guidance and advisement mentoring initiative was established to decrease chronic absenteeism and behavior infractions. Due to Covid-19, there was no opportunity to host the summer bridge program to address procedural knowledge of high school transition. Furthermore, my study developed a plan of action for the Nurturing Experiences for Student Transitions (NEST) program to increase high school readiness for eighth-grade students at E.W. Diggs Academy by the start of ninth-grade. Throughout my analysis, I sought to respond to the following research questions:

1. Did benchmark data in reading and math increase by 5% for eighth-grade students transitioning to high school after Saturday Academy participation?
2. What impact did the Saturday Academy have on reading and math outcomes measured by the TN Ready state assessment?
3. To what extent did the GAP initiative improve chronic absenteeism for students transitioning to ninth grade?

4. What is the student perception of high school readiness when making the transition to high school?
5. What is teacher perception of high school readiness for students transitioning to high school?

Chapter three is divided into three sections and comprises details for the applied research design and a clear explanation of research methods. First, a collaborative effort was used to develop an action plan to address declining academic performance, chronic absenteeism, and social anxiety when transitioning from middle to high school. This section includes an overview of stakeholder collaboration and engagement, a review of the timeline and process, existing research guiding the program's construction, and the data reviewed to drive the action plan's formation.

The second section presents the complete action plan and the research questions, as stated in Chapter One. Each research question was designed to guide each element of the action plan. The various elements represent the collaborative efforts made to address the problem, and each element has one or more measurable goals. This section will also provide specific details for the required operations around each component to include: Systems and procedures, participant expectations and goals, timelines, resources and materials to use, and those responsible for each activity.

The concluding section presents the program evaluation of the action plan conducted following one full year of implementation. To assess and evaluate the effectiveness of the program, formative and summative assessments were conducted. A mixed-methods approach was needed, so quantitative and qualitative data were reviewed for each action plan element. The evaluation's focus was to determine if goals were attained and improved the school's ability to

positively impact high school readiness amongst eighth-grade students transitioning to high school. Proper explanations and rationale were provided for each research question and answered throughout the program evaluation process. An in-depth analysis will give a guide to utilizing the data during the decision-making process.

Development of the Action Plan

After the 2017-2018 school year, the instructional leadership team met and reviewed state accountability data, attendance, behavior infractions, and counseling reports. The assistant principal, instructional coach, guidance counselor, and teachers discovered a deficit in eighth-grade academic performance and increased behavior infractions, suspensions, and counseling referrals. Upon reviewing our feeder pattern and analyzing three high schools' accountability data, the team's concern stemmed from the whole student and their unreadiness to make the proper transition into high school. To start the 2018-2019 school year, former students returned and provided feedback through informal conversations around the multitude of challenges with their ninth-grade changes. Students expressed their experience locating classes, making new friends, being ridiculed, knowing who to ask for help, their desire to attend school, and managing the academic demands/workload. Following this conversation, the principal met with the assistant principal, guidance counselor, and instructional coach to perform a root cause analysis on existing quantitative and qualitative data. The TN Ready accountability data indicated an overall decline in language arts and math scores for many eighth-grade students at E.W. Diggs Academy.

Table 1

Chronic Absenteeism 2018-19

Chronic Absenteeism Trends Over Time				
Indicator	Subgroup	2018 Baseline	2019 Performance	Change in %
Chron. Abs.	8 th Grade	19.7%	20.4%	0.7%
Chron. Abs.	All Students	12.6%	12.0%	-0.6
Chron. Abs.	All ED	14.3%	14.7%	0.4%

Table 2

Language Arts and Math Results 2018

2018 Performance Rates							
Subject	Grade	Student Group	Below	Approaching	OT	Mastered	OTM
ELA	8	All Students	19.4%	74.2%	6.5%	0.0%	6.5%
ELA	All	All Students	29.2%	57.1%	12.4%	1.2%	13.7%
Math	8	All Students	38.7%	45.2%	16.1%	0.0%	16.1%
Math	All	All Students	40.7%	45.7%	13.6%	0.0%	13.6%
ELA	8	ED	22.2%	70.4%	7.4%	0.0%	7.4%
ELA	All	ED	29.1%	56.7%	12.8%	1.4%	14.2%
Math	8	ED	37.0%	48.1%	14.8%	0.0%	14.8%
Math	All	ED	41.5%	45.1%	13.4%	0.0%	13.4%

Table 3

Language Arts and Math Results 2019

2019 Performance Rates							
Subject	Grade	Student Group	Below	Approaching	OT	Mastered	OTM
ELA	8	All Students	25.8%	74.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
ELA	All	All Students	25.9%	60.0%	14.1%	0.0%	14.1%
Math	8	All Students	51.6%	32.3%	16.1%	0.0%	16.1%
Math	All	All Students	41.9%	39.7%	18.4%	0.0%	18.4%
ELA	8	ED	25.0%	75.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
ELA	All	ED	24.0%	64.6%	11.5%	0.0%	11.5%
Math	8	ED	50.0%	30.0%	20.0%	0.0%	20.0%
Math	All	ED	37.5%	42.7%	19.8%	0.0%	19.8%

The team also noticed an increase in student referrals, suspensions tied to bullying incidents, and increasing counseling referrals. Lastly, when reviewing students' average daily attendance and chronic absenteeism reports, we saw a decline in eighth-grade over the previous two years. Eighth-grade students had the highest chronic absenteeism rate of 15% last school year. The entire school average is 11.2%, and we are looking to decrease this percentage by 2%. We will need the eighth-grade chronic absenteeism rate to reduce by a minimum of 2% for this to occur. The team then met with eighth-grade students, teachers, and community partners to determine the best course of action for combatting the problem. As we continued to collaborate and develop possible solutions based on the data presented, a decision was made to attack this problem from multiple angles. The group began meeting in the Summer of 2018 and continued throughout the 2019-2020 school year.

The leadership team used relevant research cited in Chapter Two to develop the action plan through consistent collaboration efforts. For instance, Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) conducted a research study to prove a complete transition program is needed to address the areas necessary for new ninth-grade students to succeed in their transition to high school. Comprehensive transition programs work for students "only when the school provides complete support." Akos and Galassi (2004) found students' top concerns and anticipations during the middle school to high school transition appeared to identify with three separate but interrelated components—academic, procedural, and social-emotional. This study found academic concerns were coping with increased homework and more challenging courses. Procedural matters involved navigating around and dealing with the school environment's broader complexities, including multiple classes taught by different teachers. Simultaneously, social-emotional concerns included fitting in and making new friends, getting along with peers, and coping with bullies or more senior

students. We felt schools should aim to provide activities around transitions to promote positive relationships and address student needs as they enter high school. This research helped guide the leadership team in developing Nurturing Experiences for Student Transitions (the NEST Level Project) to accommodate student needs related to the three components mentioned above.

As we began developing a plan of action and continued to think about academic achievement loss our eighth-grade students suffer during transitions, we looked at a study from Alspaugh (1998) that explored the nature of achievement loss associated with middle to high school. This ex post facto study's primary goal was to examine the heart of the achievement loss associated with transitioning from middle school to high school. Second, the goal was to determine if there is a relationship between school-to-school transitions and the percentage of chronically absent students in their first high school year. We wanted to build this program to improve transition practices that will sustain academic achievement in high school. Williamston (2010) indicated the single most predictive indicator of high school dropout is students' academic standing during their ninth-grade year. Students with high absenteeism in ninth-grade and failing one or more courses are three times less likely to complete high school. We understood the short-term and long-term impact a successful transition program could have on our students.

Increasing the support and rigor around academics for reading and math can prove beneficial for our eighth-grade students. The Saturday Academy is an element of the program designed to increase student performance. Andrews and Bishop (2012) identified factors contributing to the academic challenges during transitions, such as increasing content and skills demand, more classes being tracked by academic ability, and less individual support being provided.

Additionally, Converse and Lignugaris-Kraft (2009) reported a positive impact from mentoring on student attitudes, school engagement, school-related behavior problems, and

attendance. The school counselor identified students at-risk based on the volume of disciplinary referrals and unexcused absences. Lastly, we discussed the transition to high school, a comprehensive process that involves a collaborative effort with middle and high school administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Akos and Galassi (2004) indicated the need for feeder middle schools and receiving high schools with open communication to identify specific academic, social, and procedural matters in the middle school to high school transition. Summer bridge programs can frequently have the dual purpose of academically and socially preparing students for high school rigors. According to Andrews and Bishop (2012), school-level challenges can consist of a broader, more anonymous, bureaucratic school environment, a more diverse student population, and many classes and teachers. Furthermore, working collaboratively with teachers, administrators, parents, and students to create the NEST Level Project was extremely important as we continued to develop the elements to address student needs before and during their transition to high school.

Description of Action the Plan

Each year, thousands of students make the crucial transition from middle school to high school. Mizelle (2005) discussed how many adolescents often experience a larger, more impersonal school and a more competitive, grade-oriented environment. Our previous eighth-grade students reported that high school teachers have higher expectations and give more work than their middle school teachers. They worried that more senior students would tease or harass them, that they might get lost in their new school's hallways, that schoolwork would be more demanding and more time-consuming, and those high school teachers will not help them as much as their middle school teachers did. Each element in this project was developed from research and informal conversation with middle and high school students. Our team worked

collaboratively to create a challenging and supportive middle school program to help students smoothly transition into high school.

The elements in my action plan strongly align with my study's framework and help address my research questions. Mizelle (2005) helped us recognize that the transition is an extended process involving middle and high school administrators, teachers, parents, and students while demanding more than a short-term program developed and implemented primarily by high schools. Facilitating the transition from middle school to high school requires programs that challenge and support students throughout middle school and programs that specifically address the transition period.

Table 4 provides the elements and details of the action plan.

Table 4

Action Plan for the NEST Level Project

Element	Goals	Timeline	Who	Budget
Academic Tutoring (Saturday Academy)	Process – To increase formative student data on interim assessments. Outcome – To increase achievement scores on the TN Ready Language Arts and Math by 5%.	Spring 2021	Principal, assistant principal, teachers	\$7,200
G.A.P Initiative (Guidance and Advisement Program)	Process – decrease in office referrals (<i>n</i> count). Outcome – To decrease Chronic Absenteeism by 2%.	October 2020- Spring 2021	Principal, assistant principal, guidance counselor, teachers	\$850
Bridge Program	Outcome – To improve student transitions around operations upon entering high school, increasing high school readiness.	March 2021	H.S. Principals, H.S. teachers, H.S. counselors, M.S. counselor, M.S. Principal	\$550

Academic tutoring.

Using data and research to develop the action plan, the team developed a tutoring schedule to accommodate eighth-grade students transitioning to high school. The action plan was created using a collaborative effort; however, when thinking about resources needed to provide a compelling Saturday academy, the adequate financial resources would be the determining factor. In previous years, tutoring was done after school three days per week, and the focus was geared towards students performing in the approaching or below categories. The target students were clear, but the approach around content was not. This Saturday academy would require intense planning and intentionality to ensure this element can impact eighth-grade students preparing to enter high school. The assistant principal, instructional coach, and guidance counselor all met in collaboration with me to determine the length of the program, standards of focus, target students, teacher selection, outcome goals, and the desired budget. After careful review of the previous years' data accompanied by extensive research, the team decided to proceed with a Saturday academy to include six four-hour sessions and four teachers. When considering the staff needed to improve the problem, the team decided to go with two Language Arts teachers and two Math teachers. Using this approach will enable the team to group students by ability and be intentional about the focus standards based on previous assessment data and student needs. Each session had focus standards and concluded with a short assessment to check for understanding outlined in my plan. These sessions continued throughout the Spring months and ended before our state assessment. Concluding this element, we used Mastery Connect results to measure the effectiveness due to no available state assessment results.

Mentoring initiative.

As the team continued to follow the research, we created the Guidance and Advisement Program (GAP) to fill the social-emotional void in many eighth-grade students. This element

was designed to address social-emotional needs and increase their emotional intelligence before transitioning into high school. The GAP initiative was divided into seven sessions that span from September 2020 through March 2021 before holiday breaks and district-scheduled professional development days. Each teacher or staff member was assigned a group of students to cover each topic. All staff members received training on the subject before the scheduled date in a complete staff meeting setting. The professional development was broken down into modules to include a schedule, learning objectives, videos, and students' activities. Ensuring consistency in each classroom would prove to be beneficial for evaluation purposes. According to our office referral data, the topics covered were those the team identified as being highly critical areas. After looking at the data and research available, it was determined that mentoring topics would be the most beneficial for eighth-grade students as they transition into high school.

During the district scheduled half-days, we were allotted four hours for instruction and activities. Based on history, half-day attendance had carried record low numbers. There were many contributing factors to the low attendance to include transportation, childcare, and engagement. Mentoring was identified through research as an element that could increase attendance, lower behavior infractions, and support social-emotional learning. The GAP provided students with new knowledge and strategies to improve self-awareness around social-emotional moments in middle school and throughout their transition into the high school setting.

Table 6 provides a detailed outline of the GAP initiative.

Table 5

Outline for the Guidance and Advisement Program (GAP)

Dates	Breakfast 7:45-8:30	Guidance /Advisement Topics 8:30-10:00	Lunch with Mentors 10:00-10:30	School-wide Activity 10:30-11:30
9/20/2020	Morning Message	Child Abuse	Various locations	Guest Speaker
10/09/2020	Morning Message	Bullying/ Sexting	Cafeteria	Guest Speaker
11/06/2020	Morning Message	Substance Abuse	Various locations	Guest Speaker
12/18/2020	Morning Message	Personal Hygiene	Various Locations	Guest Speaker
1/15/2021	Morning Message	Healthy Choices	Cafeteria	Movie Day/ Popcorn
2/12/2021	Morning Message	Financial Literacy	Various Locations	All Hearts Dance
3/11/2021	Morning Message	Test Anxiety	Outside Lawn	Test Pep Kickoff

Bridge practices.

Maintaining a collaborative relationship with neighboring high schools proved to be beneficial in the development of this component. In developing the action plan, the team collaborated with two neighboring high schools to build a Bridge Program for students entering ninth-grade. The program was designed to assist students with the day-to-day high school operations in helping students with social anxiety. Students often returned to EWDA and shared their experiences throughout high school in the first year. Those stories were many times very troubling and disheartening. The Bridge Program was set to begin in March 2021; however, due to COVID-19, this did not occur in the same format. Initially, students were to shadow others throughout the day and interview a senior to learn more about what to expect upon entering high school. A virtual process was hopeful, but our district remained 100% virtual at that time. The program would have gone on for a week and covered various topics. This experience would give students time with high school teachers and administrators to navigate the school building, learn their class schedule, inquire about clubs or sports, meet with the guidance counselor, review the curriculum, and meet incoming classmates. This experience would have attempted to allow students to enter high school with confidence. Schools that build the relationship with feeder middle schools tend to succeed with their freshman class. At the end of the bridge program and the middle of the first quarter, students and teachers would have completed a perception survey to share the bridge program's effectiveness.

Timeline and resources.

Following the data analysis and formal research, the implementation of the action plan began in September 2020. As the action plan continued, I persisted with student perception surveys and walk-through observations on teachers to make the proper adjustments. My plan was

met with approval from the superintendent and chief academic officer, and I wanted to share results to apprise a possible district initiative. They both were delighted and eager to pursue my study upon its conclusion. The GAP initiative was the first part of the action plan to begin. Second, Saturday Academy started in October of 2020. These Saturday sessions ran once a month from October to March. The last to be implemented would have been the Bridge Program in March 2021. This project's cost is outlined in Table 3; however, the cost could change based on the team's evaluation of the program throughout the pandemic. The action plan's support will continue into the next school year, and I am very optimistic about this becoming a district initiative with multiple middle schools and high schools.

Evaluation of Action the Plan

The program evaluation design was used for this study with a mixed-methods approach. Each element in the action plan was assessed, and each research question was answered with results. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected throughout my program's implementation to address the problem and answer the research questions. The study was evaluated using both process and output data to guide the program. Results were used to understand the impact of transition programs on high school readiness amongst eighth-grade students. I collected qualitative data from eighth-grade students and ninth-grade teachers to determine what the most critical factors were perceived to be when entering high school. This data came from student interviews, student perception surveys, teacher focus groups, and informal observations. Trends in academic performance and attendance helped develop more efficient strategies for preparing students for the proper transition program. Using the mixed-methods design increased the validity and reliability of the outcomes of the NEST Level Project. I gathered information from multiple resources to outline my program's efficiency and adjusted

as needed throughout the implementation process. These changes were required to support my students' academic and social-emotional needs throughout this process.

The proper evaluation was required to measure the action plan's success and effectiveness for transitioning eighth-grade students into high school. Addressing academic loss, social-emotional learning and knowledge of high school operations were the primary concerns. The evaluation of each element helped us implement a more efficient program throughout with process goals and in the future with output goals.

Academic tutoring.

One of the program's primary goals was to increase academic proficiency for eighth-grade students at EWDA, decreasing their chances for significant academic loss upon entering high school. According to Langenkamp (2010), The transition to high school is a critical stage in students' educational trajectories and can be incredibly difficult for middle school students who struggle academically. Starting high school on a low academic track and with poor academic performance often leads to dropping out. My action plan's first element was academic tutoring, which consists of a Saturday Academy to occur monthly for four hours each session. The tutoring goal was to equip eighth-grade students with additional support to achieving the state assessment's maximum score. Before starting the program, the team collaboratively reviewed math and language arts TN Ready state assessment scores and determined students at EWDA were not prepared to enter high school. Due to COVID-19, data from 2018 was used to determine how to address this element's problem. For output data, the team reviewed benchmark data to assess progress made. Ultimately, we wanted to see if there are correlations between the students that attended tutoring and the achievement level achieved on benchmark assessments.

Reviewing this data allowed the team to evaluate its effectiveness and adjust for future development.

Mentoring initiative.

As students move from middle school to high school, their social relationships are transformed. Langenkamp (2010) suggested the degree to which social relationships change is, in part, a function of the way school districts are organized. Studies indicated that middle school social relationships are protective against poor academic outcomes in the first year of high school, but not for low-achieving middle school students. Relationships with teachers may be viewed as the most important for a student's success in school. Still, for students making the transition to high school, the relationships they build with their peers can determine how well they perform academically and how often they attend school. The second element, mentoring, focused on counselors, teachers, and administrators engaging students in sessions to support social-emotional learning. Qualitative data was collected from students on supports they needed upon transitioning to high school. However, quantitative data was used to determine if the mentoring initiative decreased chronic absenteeism. According to Baltimore City Public Schools (2016), students who leave school show signs of disengagement several years before dropping out. During their middle school years, student attendance is one major factor in predicting success in high school. This study showed that ninth-grade students who graduate, for example, have a far higher attendance rate than their peers who will not earn a diploma. This factor led our team to develop peer mentoring groups to discuss various topics impacting relationships across schools regularly. Implementing this initiative, we wanted to see a decrease in chronic absenteeism for eighth-grade students preparing to enter high school the following year. We conducted student interviews to gather preliminary data on what we should target during the peer

groups and post-interview data for how effective the groups were for preparing them for the high school environment. Student interviews were time-consuming; however, these were conducted in a virtual space by the administrator and guidance counselor during weekly guidance sessions. Students were asked questions about the challenges they face with peers, teachers, and home. The team wanted to gather data on how students cope through situations and what supports they need as they enter an essential part of their education career. I analyzed anecdotal notes and video recordings to measure the peer mentoring groups' effectiveness and how the process can be improved as we move forward. These perspectives identified challenges and helped the team determine solutions for social-emotional learning at EWDA.

The changes needed to adjust to a high school environment can create significant anxiety for eighth-grade students, with new challenges emerging daily. Tur-Kapsa (2002) reiterates that such change stimulates further growth for many students as they actively and productively cope with the unique challenges they face. However, the changes may be overwhelming and too demanding and lead to maladaptive behavior and adjustment problems.

Bridge practices.

My third and final element was a targeted bridge week to complete the NEST Level Project's inner workings. Neild (2009) discussed four theories about why ninth-grade poses difficulties for some students. The first is that ninth-grade coincides with life-course changes, such as reduced parental supervision and increased peer influence. The second is that in moving to a new school, students must break the bonds they have formed with their middle-school teachers and peers. The third is that some students are inadequately prepared for high school. The final theory is that some high schools' organization is a significant source of students' difficulty. The bridge program is designed to provide students with the confidence they need

before making the transition. Bridge practices allow students to enter the school building to familiarize themselves with rules and procedures. We wanted to work with high school counselors and administrators to ensure students received the proper supports during the week. Our job would have been to prep students for what to expect and what questions to ask. Qualitative data and research will determine where the bridge program should focus during the process next school year.

A survey will be administered to evaluate the effectiveness of the elements upon completion. Due to COVID-19, this element has been placed on hold. We will need to do this in the virtual space; however, this will require a different plan. The implementation was scheduled for March 2021, before Spring break. We were not able to confirm this part of NEST. The team will know if feeder high schools can accommodate our eighth-grade students for an entire week or a couple of days this Summer, depending on the course of the pandemic. The original plan was designed for students to shadow other students for a whole day, while other days would be time for peer discussion and meetings with counselors. Informal conversations, surveys, and focus group data supported the team with the implementation of this element and improvements for program implementation as we advance.

The logic model below provides a list of each element drawn from the research to include a process and output goal. The data used in my analysis assisted in determining the success of my action plan. The table below gives you a synopsis of each element to include the process and output goals to correlate with each previously listed research question.

Table 6

Logic Model/Evaluation Plan for the NEST Level Project

Element	Goals	Timeline	Who	Evaluation of Data
Academic Tutoring (Saturday Academy)	Process – To increase student engagement and formative data on interim assessments. Outcome – To increase achievement scores on the TN Ready ELA assessment by 5% and Math by 5%.	Spring 2021	Principal, assistant principal, teachers	Teacher perception survey, Student Survey, Classroom Observations, Formative/Interim Assessment Data, TN Ready Scores
G.A.P Initiative (Guidance and Advisement Program)	Process – decrease office referrals (<i>n</i> count). Outcome – To decrease Chronic Absenteeism by 2%.	October 2020- Spring 2021	Principal, assistant principal, guidance counselor, teachers	Student Perception Surveys, Teacher Focus Group, Office Referrals, Average Daily Attendance Rate
Bridge Program	Outcome – To improve student transitions around operations and procedures upon entering high school, improving high school readiness.	March 2021	H.S. Principals, H.S. teachers, H.S. counselors, M.S. counselor, M.S. Principal	Feeder Teacher & Administrator Perception Survey, Focus Group, Principal Interview, Student Perception Survey

Conclusion

My action plan aimed to successfully transition eighth-grade students to high school without a decrease in academic performance, increase in chronic absenteeism, or be at increased risk for social-emotional matters while balancing the struggles around high school procedures and processes. As a result, students will leave middle school with extreme confidence in entering high school after adequately preparing for the challenge. Our supports would seek to improve the district's graduation rate and meet all measurable goals. All stakeholders in both middle schools and high schools were essential to the success of this project. Chapter Four presents my research findings and provides a detailed analysis of questions and goals.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Introduction

Chapter Four provides quantitative and qualitative results of this applied research study. Data is presented to examine whether the NEST Level Project achieved the desired goals and improve the transition program. Chapter Four will review the problem, purpose, and design of my study. I will briefly connect my research of literature to my program and restate my research questions. Last, I will answer each research question and present the data collection process and analysis of results. Explicit connections between my elements and the action plan will be made.

As stated in Chapter Three, the purpose of this mixed-methods applied research study is to improve high school readiness for eighth-grade students transitioning to ninth-grade by increasing academic proficiency in reading and math while simultaneously decreasing chronic absenteeism. In Chapter One, issues related to high school readiness were identified as the problem of practice and the purpose for conducting this research study. Chapter Two provided a review of research related to the purpose and design of this study. Chapter Three described the development and implementation of the action plan and the program evaluation method used to evaluate this study's action plan.

Suppose students emerge into high school with academic deficits and social-emotional challenges. In that case, they are more likely to finish behind their cohort members or drop out of high school before their senior year. At EWDA, we struggled to prepare students for the many ninth-grade demands without proper transition support programs. The study's framework revolves around three areas of focus. First, I wanted to improve student performance preventing

academic achievement loss in ninth-grade. Secondly, I wanted to address social-emotional concerns, creating anxiety and stress during transitions. Lastly, I wanted to inform students of high school procedures to prepare them for high school experiences. Based on a three-year trend in the data, I designed Nurturing Experiences for Student Transitions to transition to high school. The current population of eighth-grade students participated in this program, and the results are explicitly explained throughout my analysis.

Description

The data examined and presented in this study to develop the action plan was based on performance and surveys from 30 eighth-grade students at E.W. Diggs Academy. In 2016, 6.5% of students mastered grade-level standards, with 0% scoring mastery in 2017 and 2018. However, 74.6% were approaching mastery of standards according to state assessment results. This data directly impacted students leaving middle school and transitioning into high school level courses and content. Students are not graduating with their original cohort across the school district, with a graduation rate of 79.2%. In translation, this meant one in every five students is at risk upon entering high school. None of the 30 students in my school produced minimal growth, leaving the eighth grade, causing a lack of high school content readiness.

While the transition from middle school to high school symbolizes a coming of age, Cooper and Markoe-Hayes (2005) suggest that it is also a time in a young person's life to create feelings of isolation and disconnection, causing an immeasurable sense of loneliness. The challenges of new relationships, academic rigor, negotiating the physical plant, and fitting in all can make a very natural part of life's course seem too daunting, and feelings of isolation, rejection, and alienation can arise. These feelings only intensify for youth in urban areas from

families with low-income levels, ethnic minorities, immigrants, and without a family history of success in schooling environments.

Students who experience a rocky transition to high school are not motivated, prepared, or ready to attend post-secondary schooling. Research in this study clearly outlined students who have difficulty adjusting to academic and social demands in high school also experience higher academic failure rates, disciplinary issues, feelings of not belonging, and dropout. For students in poverty who already face an array of educational hurdles such as fewer advanced courses, resources, and effective teachers, a bumpy transition will continue to perpetuate the lack of student achievement, low graduation rates, and low enrollment in post-secondary opportunities. Research on this topic is essential if educators and policymakers plan to address the realities of increased dropout with urban students as early as the ninth and tenth-grades.

Data

This applied research study utilizes a program evaluation design. Quantitative data included benchmark data from Mastery Connect, an interim assessment platform used to assess standards-based instruction. Additionally, chronic absenteeism days missed, and percentages were gathered. Qualitative data was collected through interviews with 30 eighth-grade students and a focus group with 10 ninth-grade teachers. On average, interviews took 15 minutes, while the focus groups were 30 minutes. The qualitative instruments addressed the academic transition and resiliency, the social adjustment, school structures, practices, and culture.

Research question one.

Research question one stated, “Did benchmark data in reading and math increase by 5% for eighth-grade students transitioning to high school after Saturday Academy participation?” The results are presented below concerning each element associated with this question. Walk-

through observations were conducted, and a student perception survey was given to evaluate the program's success. The data listed below shows that eighth-grade students performed higher on standards with Mastery Connect than rates from state assessment scores in 2019. In Language Arts and Math, students exceeded the 5% goal outlined in the action plan.

Eighth-grade students at EWDA were provided six Saturday Academy sessions, occurring once per month beginning in September 2020-February 2021. The students were provided tutoring for four hours during each session, with two hours in Language Arts and two hours in Math. These Saturday sessions targeted standards that eighth-grade students performed below grade-level on during the 2019 state assessment and the start of the school year (SOY) assessment. This provided a foundation for the data-driven instruction needed to increase proficiency in these two areas. In Language Arts, standards covered included citing textual evidence, understanding central idea and theme, and a text's structure reveals the fundamental understanding within a text. In Math, we focused on standards around algebraic expressions and math computation.

I administered a district benchmark assessment to measure students' performance on standards and questions aligned with the TN Ready state assessment in both content areas. The results are listed below. Eighth-grade students in 2021 taking the benchmark assessment on standards scored 7.2% higher than students in 2019 on the state assessment in Language-Arts. In Math, students scored 7.3% higher than students in 2019 on the state assessment. Both content areas exceeded the 5% goal for improvement before the end of the year. Throughout the process, I could see teachers gaining confidence and students persevering when challenged.

Table 7

Language Arts and Math Results, 2021 & 2019 Comparison

2021 Mastery Connect Performance Rates							
Subject	Grade	Student Group	Below	Appr.	OTM '19	OTM '21	% Change
ELA	8	All Students	14.3%	78.5%	0%	7.2%	+7.2%
Math	8	All Students	33.2%	43.4%	16.1%	23.4%	+7.3%

To ensure students were getting high-quality instruction during Saturday Academy, I conducted informal walk-through observations with teachers using a tool to gauge if the lesson was objective-driven and contained content vocabulary (see Appendix A). While these observations do not specifically answer the 5% question, they support the quantitative data through triangulation. Common themes that emerged from my observations were 100% of teachers engaging students in objective-driven lessons by having the objective present and students understanding the objective past merely repeating it. All teachers had academic vocabulary word walls in their virtual classroom; however, 50% of the time, teachers did not make connections to the vocabulary and the lesson itself. Making connections accurately and referencing the vocabulary could push students to higher levels as we prepared to transition them into high school.

To conclude the Saturday Academy, I utilized informal walk-through observations (see Appendix A), and students were given a perception survey to measure teacher effectiveness in five categories (see Appendix B). Mastery Connect data was also used to measure its effectiveness. In the student perception survey, students were surveyed for classroom

engagement, classroom learning strategies, rigorous classroom expectations, classroom teacher-student relationships, and pedagogical effectiveness. Classroom engagement targeted how attentive and invested students were in class. Classroom learning strategies aimed at how well students deliberately used techniques to manage their learning processes in class. Classroom rigorous expectations focused on how much students felt that a specific teacher held them to high expectations around effort, understanding, persistence, and class performance. Classroom student-teacher relationships targeted how strong the social connection was between teachers and students within and beyond the classroom. Lastly, pedagogical effectiveness measured student perceptions of the quality of teaching and the amount of learning they experienced from a particular teacher. The chart below includes the percentage of students who responded favorably to the questions asked (see Appendix B).

Table 8

Student Perception Results

Topic Description	Focus Area	Results
Classroom Engagement	How attentive and invested students are in class.	41%
Classroom Learning Strategies	How well students deliberately use strategies to manage their own learning processes in class.	61%
Classroom Rigorous Expectations	How much students feel that a specific teacher holds them to high expectations around effort, understanding, persistence, and performance in class.	76%
Classroom Teacher-Student Relationships	How strong the social connection is between teachers and students within and beyond the classroom.	65%
Pedagogical Effectiveness	Perceptions of the quality of teaching and amount of learning students experience from a particular teacher.	72%

When students were asked, “How interested are you in class?” 53% of them marked favorable responses to include extremely interested or quite interested. When asked, “In class, how often do you use strategies to learn more effectively?” 61% of students responded favorably by selecting almost always or frequently. When asked, “How often does the teacher take time to make sure you understand the material?” 81% of students responded favorably by selecting encourages me a tremendous amount or encourages me quite a bit. When asked, “How respectful is this teacher towards you?” 85% of students responded favorably by selecting extremely respectful or quite respectful. Lastly, when asked, “How much does this teacher know about the topic of his/her class?” 93% of students responded favorably by selecting a tremendous amount or quite a bit.

The findings for question one reveal students did become more proficient in Language Arts and Math classes after Saturday Academy. The benchmark assessment through Mastery Connect showed an increase in on-track and mastery students by more than 5%. However, there is more room to grow before we can conclude students are high school ready. Informal walk-throughs revealed teachers had objective-driven lessons prepared for each Saturday, and academic vocabulary was a focal point during instruction. Students responded to the perception survey, and it revealed that teachers were impactful in all five areas reviewed. Students viewed teachers favorably around pedagogical effectiveness, classroom expectations, teacher-student relationships, and classroom strategies. However, classroom engagement was shallow, which can impact content transfer in any subject.

Research question two.

Research question two stated, “What impact did the Saturday Academy have on reading and math outcomes measured by the TN Ready state assessment?” Due to COVID-19, there was

no testing data for 2020, and there will not be any state-level testing data for 2021. As a result, no data was available to answer this question. The benchmark assessment is standards-based, and the questions were designed in the same style. Therefore, the benchmark assessment data was used to gauge the impact Saturday Academy had on our eighth-grade students. The cut scores were generated based on previous state results. Scores ranging from 1%-24% were considered below grade-level standards, 25%-50% were approaching grade-level standards, 51%-74% was on-track with grade-level standards, and 75%-100% was considered mastery of grade-level standards. Again, these measurements were identical to the state assessment, which provided me with closely aligned results to gauge high school readiness around academic achievement before students transition to high school.

Research question three.

Research question three asked, “To what extent did the GAP initiative improve chronic absenteeism for students transitioning to ninth-grade?” The results are presented for each element are associated with this question. Additional data shows that students participated in mentoring for social-emotional support and interested in attending school regularly without reservation.

Participating in the GAP initiative required students to attend mentoring sessions with guest speakers and various topics throughout seven months. Of seven monthly sessions, there was 98% attendance on the days the mentoring was implemented. Several stakeholders were invited to develop the action plan to include the student council, the assistant principal, guidance counselor, and community adopters. Additionally, 100% of eighth-grade students attended four of six sessions throughout the months. Topics for mentoring included child abuse, bullying, sexting, substance abuse, personal hygiene, healthy choices, financial literacy, and test anxiety.

I conducted student interviews (see Appendix C) and reviewed a portion regarding social-emotional support needed when transitioning to high school. Students were asked how they feel when making new friends, situations where they were bullied or teased, and their experience in the cafeteria. Following the monthly mentoring sessions, students were more open to sharing with their groups and working through the home and school challenges. After conducting the hygiene session, a student stated, “I was always embarrassed if I had to come to school without showering. It is seven people in my house and only one bathroom. Many days, I do not get an opportunity to shower if I want to be on time. Now that I know teachers and counselors will help, I have no reason to play sick or hide in the closet.” The previously mentioned statement was so powerful and revealed the meaning behind the NEST Level Project.

When students were asked, “Have you been in a situation where you felt you were teased or bullied? If so, what happened?” Sixteen students responded with a no, and four students stated yes; however, they did not care to provide details of the situation. Two students responded yes but noted that the memory was too painful to share. Several other students provided a synopsis about their experience and how they were able to overcome it. All of the previously mentioned data had a significant impact on chronic absenteeism in previous years. After successfully implementing the initiative, we saw a significant decrease in chronic absenteeism amongst eighth-grade students. Their attendance was always the lowest across the school; however, we exceeded the goal of a 2% decrease when implementing the GAP initiative.

Table 9

Chronic Absenteeism 2020-21

Chronic Absenteeism Trends Over Time					
Indicator	Subgroup	19-20	20-21	Decrease in %	Change in Rate
Chron. Abs.	8 th Grade	20.4%	8.2%	-12.2	-59.8%
Chron. Abs.	All Students	12.0%	5.4%	-6.6	-55%
Chron. Abs.	All ED	14.7%	7.9%	-6.8	-46%

In answering the question if the GAP initiative decreased the chronic absenteeism rate amongst eighth-grade students, the findings will show a lower percentage of chronic absenteeism during their participation in mentoring.

Research question four.

Research question four ask, “What is the student perception of high school readiness when making the transition to high school?” The results are presented for each element associated with this question. An analysis of answers was performed, and themes were gathered. I will present common answers to each question throughout the explanation of question four findings. Student interviews revealed the NEST Level Project's need and the concern for eighth-grade students transitioning to high school.

In student interviews (see Appendix C), students were asked questions to gauge their perception of high school readiness. In operationalizing the term “high school readiness,” I considered three focus areas to assess their perception of the middle to high school transition. These three areas were academic achievement, social-emotional learning, and procedural transition practices. First, students were asked icebreaker questions. These questions consisted

of: “How old are you? What part of town are you from? What high school would you like to attend?” At the interview time, I had 16 students who were 13, and 14 students stated they were 14. Twenty eighth-grade students were from South Memphis in the 38126-zip code, listed as the state's lowest-socioeconomic area. The remaining ten students were from the Midtown and Whitehaven areas which are more affluent communities. Lastly, when asked what high school they would like to attend, students listed various optional programs, but three leading schools recently visited EWDA on a recruiting trip.

The second portion of the survey asked students questions about high school transition practices and social-emotional learning. Students were asked: “How difficult was it to find your classes in middle school? Did you get lost in 6th grade? Was there someone available to assist in the beginning?” Four students responded, “I was nervous, and teachers helped me along the way.” Five other students stated, “It was challenging. I did get lost, but there were many people there to help me.” Ten students said, “It was very difficult for me, and I didn’t know who to speak with when I was lost.” Eleven of the students responded, “It was not very difficult for me because we had time during the summer to take a tour of the school and learn to open our lockers. We knew where teachers’ classrooms were before the first day. Teachers were supportive and helped us in the beginning.” These responses revealed the importance of bridge supports in the summer.

Students were also asked: “Was it difficult finding and opening your locker?” “Were you able to locate the restrooms?” “How difficult was it traveling from class to class without being late?” Student responses aligned with the first question in the series. Those who participated in summer bridge programs were familiar with the building and procedures. Others struggled throughout the day with opening lockers and getting to class on time. Students were then asked:

“How would you describe your experience in the cafeteria? How were students called up? Did you know where to sit? How were the food choices?” Several students stated that they hated the food but knew how things flowed because someone was on a microphone directing. However, I received several lengthy responses about how wild, crowded, and scary their cafeteria experiences were. One student responded: “My experience in the cafeteria was scary because everyone was staring at us 6th graders. To get our food, we just walked around the cafeteria until we got to the serving line. I did not know where to sit because the tables were in weird number orders. The food choices were fine for school food, but I feel that school food should be improved tremendously.”

The following questions on the survey were closely related to social-emotional awareness. The first question asked, “How did you feel about making new friends?” Students responded unfavorably in a few ways by stating, “It wasn’t really easy because I’m not social.” Another student said, “At the start of school, I’m always nervous, and I don’t know how to talk to certain people.” Many students expressed the idea of making new friends gives them anxiety. A student stated, “Other students can be rude and treat you cruel. I don’t make new friends often.” Think of the implications in the previous statements when kids transition to high school. It will consist of a much larger environment and often with less support. Some responses revealed how they were very confident when meeting new people, which could be attributed to their outgoing personalities.

Students were also asked, “Have you been in a situation where you felt you were teased or bullied? If so, what happened?” More than 20 students said they have not experienced being bullied or they did not want to share because the situation caused anxiety. One student shared and stated, “It was a group of boys that messed with me every day no matter what was going

on. They threw paper at me, erasers, pencils, and whatever else they could find. I told my teachers several times, and she told them to stop. It continued, so I said something else to her, and she moved them away from me. They still found a way to do it, so I took matters into my own hands (not the best idea). I started throwing stuff back, that didn't work either. So the next day, when they did that, I walked out of the classroom, and that's when I finally got an answer. They were all put in detention, and it never happened again.” Another student shared, “Yes. I was bullied very badly in 6th grade because of my hair. Before I entered 6th grade 4th-5th, I was also bullied to the point where I felt very depressed, and I was considering ending my own life, but I talked to my counselor and my mom, and when we moved somewhere else to start over, I didn't expect for the same thing to happen. I did get better entering 7th and 8th grade because I knew people from the previous grade, and I learned from my past experiences to love myself for who I am.”

The previously mentioned response provided insight into how students feel at school throughout the years, especially when transitioning into a new environment. The most disturbing part was a student sharing how the bullying started from a teacher calling him names for being overweight and having Tourette Syndrome.

The focus during the third portion of the interviews was on transition practices and school operations. Students were asked, “Are you looking to visit any high schools before you transition to ninth-grade?” All 30 students stated they want to visit schools but fear this will not be feasible during the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked: “Are you familiar with any school procedures that may change when entering high school?” students responded by saying, “I know the teachers are very strict and do not give you a lot of time on assignments like in middle school. I’m not familiar with the systems, but I heard that you have more

freedom.” I asked students about performing arts interests; however, only a few mentioned playing in the band, orchestra, or chorus. Athletics was in the concern of a few students; however, they informed me that high school athletics is more serious, intimidating, and they did not know who to speak with about joining a team. I then asked students: “Were you assigned a student mentor when you arrived at middle school? Do you think it would be helpful when entering high school?” I received 30 responses of no; however, several students mentioned it would probably help high school transition.

The last portion was associated with middle school's academic achievement and thoughts about high school content complexities. I asked: “How difficult is it to make good grades? How do teachers support you in your work with long-term projects and homework? What would you need them to do differently for high school?” Students responded by saying, “Schoolwork right now isn't hard at all. Teachers give us a lot of it, and it's difficult to get it all done on time.” Many students agreed that high school would be more challenging, and they are afraid of not being smart enough to make the ninth-grade transition. Students want high school teachers to understand and be very clear with instructions with long-term projects and homework. A few students mentioned high school teachers not helping with projects and homework from what older friends and siblings have shared. As I closed out this question, one student stated, “I wish they would be more empathic towards the students and more willing to listen. I don't particularly appreciate that some teachers have a near-god complex and automatically underestimate us due to our ages. I do not struggle with very many projects, but If I did, I would probably try and figure it out on my own and work from there.”

When asked, “Do you feel the work is more challenging or requires more effort as you are promoted to higher grade levels?” All the students emphatically answered yes, but a few

stated they could be pushed more. One student responded by saying, “Yes, being challenged is good, but it can make students stress, leading to bad grades and emotions.” The previous statement is a critical reason behind the NEST Level Project. Students were also asked, “What is your perception of teacher expectations for high school in different classes/subject areas?” Students responded by saying they feel teachers expect you to work more independently in high school, and teachers will expect you to be more mature. A student stated, “I think they want us to succeed and push ourselves.”

The last question of the interview asked students, “How does your current school (or counselors) support students preparing to enter the ninth-grade?” The students answered they feel the counselors support them by providing resources, discussing the complexities of high school, and providing resources. Still, they honestly did not see how they were being supported intentionally for high school. They all voiced the guidance counselors' support; however, they did more work around college and career readiness than being prepared for ninth-grade. The counselors support the high school transition by creating the four-year plans and ensuring students are confident of an elective focus for high school. Students expressed wanted more support about their immediate future; however, they enjoy all the college and career readiness activities. The student interviews revealed some critical factors to building an efficient transition program. This information helped me modify the current practices and shift support for future classes to come.

Research question five.

Research question five asked, “What is teacher perception of high school readiness for students transitioning to high school?” The results are presented for each element associated with the question. An analysis of answers was performed, and themes were gathered. I will present

common answers to each question throughout the explanation of question five findings. The idea of transition practices performed by a teacher in schools may drastically vary from those of a counselor or administrator. In a focus group (see Appendix D) with ten ninth-grade teachers, they were asked questions tied explicitly to high school readiness in the operational sense. Questions were developed from three areas: social-emotional learning, transition practices and operations, and academic achievement. During this session, teachers shared specific experiences with ninth-grade students and the lack of transition structures.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, teachers had to participate via Microsoft Teams. I was unsure if this would change the responses' dynamic, but I did obtain some magnificent feedback to uncover the NEST Level Project's next steps. Question one in the focus group asked, "What are the most important factors for incoming ninth-grade students being prepared for high school?" Teacher responses were related to self-management, organizational skills, decision making, mentorship, and getting involved in extra-curricular activities. Several teachers referenced students coming in with the necessary prerequisite skills academically and good study habits. One teacher responded by stating, "The most important factors truly are having a mentor or teacher leader in helping them transition easier. The creation of a ninth-grade academy would be good, so scholars are separated from others in the school and having social-emotional learning opportunities for students with poor social skills." Self-motivation appeared to be the most common response given to this question.

Question two asked, "How is behavior with incoming ninth-grade students? Do they lack maturity? Are there social-emotional barriers?" Teachers shared answers such as, "The answer is yes to all of your questions. Therefore, most schools have a ninth-grade academy. This academy operates as a school within a school and allows for a smoother transition to high school."

Another teacher stated, “It's a major transition to the high school level; however, with Freshman Summer Camps and ninth-grade academies, it can have a significant impact on the social transition needed for the high school experience.” One teacher explained, “From my experience working with ninth-grade students, I've learned they do lack maturity, and there are social-emotional barriers. Some of the specific social-emotional barriers include understanding and managing their emotions; setting and achieving positive goals; feeling and showing empathy for others; establishing and maintaining positive relationships and making responsible decisions.” I found the feedback given to be essential in transition planning.

The following two questions asked teachers about difficulty making new friends and being bullied. Several teachers stated that they do not feel students have problems making new friends. They think the teasing and bullying come from other ninth-grade students; however, most of them transition with friends from feeder schools. The teasing can derive from the extensive nature of high schools and the variety of demographics. One teacher shared, “From my observation, students do have difficulty finding new friends because they lack the skills to nurture positive peer relationships. Ninth-graders are still maturing and becoming more self-aware to self-manage (regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors) and recognize one's emotions, thoughts, and values. To find friends, students need to be aware of themselves and be aware of others (social awareness). Interacting and nurturing relationships requires that students be respectful and can take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Students must understand social and ethical norms for behavior when interacting with others. There is a tendency for teasing and bullying to occur by upperclassmen if the cultural expectations have not been set.” The previously mentioned

statement was profound to my research. Cultural expectations should be set before the transition taking place.

The following section delves more into school procedures. When navigating the school and thinking about school operations, teachers shared that most ninth-grade students get lost and cannot read their schedules appropriately. Interpreting is something that should be addressed during summer bridge programs. Although one teacher stated, “I think ninth-graders navigating the facility is just like any other new student. They do tend to ask more questions, which is encouraging. However, I have not witnessed any major problems with tardiness; the expectations are the same across the building.” In listening to teachers explain, it appears that ninth-grade students may have several logistical high school questions, but it does not impact them by being tardy any more than it does with upper-level students.

The group was then asked, “Have you ever been involved in the process of welcoming ninth-grade students?” Surprisingly, only one of ten teachers has been involved in their respective schools' transition process. The remaining nine teachers mentioned their school's orientation process with guidance counselors and more but had no direct experience transitioning students from middle to high school as teachers. The previous statement answered the following question, which asked, “Do students have an opportunity to spend time with you throughout the summer for any length of time in the school setting?” Teachers were not accustomed to seeing their students in the summer before school starts.

Teachers attempted to think back on what went well during the process, although they were not directly involved, and felt this was more of a question for the high school counselors. One teacher stated, “Student Orientation where students are oriented around the expectations (rules & procedures), vision, mission, and core values went well. Begin as early as ninth-grade

with educating students on the SEL core competencies and college-career readiness to establish the why and the purpose for high school.” The previously mentioned statement is another problem that prompted my research. According to the data provided by students and teachers, the process should start before ninth-grade. Conversations should be happening as early as sixth-grade, with an entire transition program for eighth-graders.

When discussing how they would lead a program to better transition to high school, teachers mentioned designing a meaningful, student-centered, and participative orientation process for an entire week to introduce students to the campus, the faculty and staff, and team-building exercises. A teacher stated, “I would incorporate notable Alumni to elaborate on their high school experiences; then divide students up into classes (Algebra I or English I). I would have the Alumni who are strong in those identified content areas bridge why the foundational aspect of mastering the content matters at the high school level.” The process explained is considered a bridge practice according to previous research outlined in Chapter Two. Ten out of 10 teachers mentioned a week-long program needed throughout the summer.

The final portion of the focus group was centered around academic achievement and readiness. Responding to five questions, teachers provided insight on student performance as I recorded factors contributing to success. When asked, “Tell me about positive experiences you’ve had with ninth-grade students entering high school. Were they prepared academically?” Teachers were able to tell me that most students come in and adjust well. Preparing them academically is challenging because of the lack of prerequisite skills. One teacher stated, “I think welcoming ninth-graders in and seeing them off at graduation is always a gratifying experience personally because I’m able to watch them grow and mature over the years. A positive experience has been observing ninth-graders setting and achieving goals and becoming leaders

among their peers. From my experience, students are not prepared academically, which can lead to them acting out behaviorally. Educators should be trained to support students with their academic deficits and provide support for them to access grade-level content. Teachers' mindsets are an important factor here. Teachers have high expectations and understand there is a difference between ability and readiness. Students come to us at different readiness levels, but they all can learn grade-level content.”

When references to the disappointments with academics, all teachers in the group referenced middle schools sending them unprepared and not properly delivering instruction in relationship to prerequisite skills. The teacher's mindset around educating students who are coming in below grade-level was another topic for discussion. They all agreed that students are not ready academically, and teachers do not have high expectations for student learning. One teacher stated, “Freshman should be exposed to high-quality instruction every day in every classroom, and high expectations should be set for students' learning. We waste too much time focusing on what teachers did or did not do in middle school. We must focus on what we can control - the here and now. How are we going to ensure equity for our freshmen? All students should have access to grade-level standards, a high-quality curriculum, and high-quality teaching utilizing research-based instructional strategies.” Ultimately, the lack of accountability, lack of confidence, and getting lost in the day-to-day transitions within a high school setting are all barriers to having success academically.

Some of the main concerns mentioned when students enter ninth-grade academically were around foundational knowledge and entering grade-level. When asked, “If you must choose one factor that contributes to student academic success the most, what would it be?” Teachers' top three factors were self-motivation, self-efficacy, and mastering independence. High school

teachers expect students to enter ninth-grade, understanding the expectations and ready to push themselves. When asked how they support students performing below grade-level, teachers stated they determine the students' performance levels in core subject areas and assessments before offering intervention. Students are then placed in cohorts for after-school tutoring or a designed block schedule for those ninth-graders to address deficit areas.

As the focus group ended, I wanted to know if any of the participating teachers had ever taught in middle school before. Four of 10 teachers previously taught in middle school; however, only one discussed how much they enjoyed it. When asked the question, "When was the last time you visited an eighth-grade activity? What is/was your perception of student behavior?" One teacher responded, "Yes. They seemed like typical middle school students. It takes the leadership to promote social development, academic proficiency, literacy, and personal integrity to develop their own identities. Student behavior reflects school leadership." Leadership is a vital component of preparation for the middle to high school transition. Student expectations for behavior and academics must be well communicated and enforced.

Conclusion

All findings from this applied research study have been presented. We established success with this program by approaching all three aspects of student transitions with the NEST Level Project. Although I met my measurable goals with quantitative data, the data provided areas for improvement. The student interviews and teacher focus group revealed other qualities needed in a program to promote successful transitions. Providing tutoring through the Saturday Academy and mentoring through the Guidance and Advisement Program (GAP) helped push best practices found through my research. I monitored the program's academic impact using a mixed-methods approach, which made for a smooth system. Each element of the action plan

contributed to the success of the project. As an Executive Principal, the program evaluation model helped me utilize the results to drive best practices daily. I observed teachers become more sound with instruction, students build confidence, and students have academic success. I witnessed a team of administrators, counselors, teachers, and community stakeholders become more knowledgeable on the middle to high school transition as a process. In Chapter Five, I will present the conclusion and implications for future research and continuous improvement.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this applied research study was to improve high school readiness for eighth-grade students transitioning to ninth-grade in high-poverty schools. While students may experience a series of transitions in their lifetime, for eighth-grade students in urban school districts and high-poverty neighborhoods, the transition to high school can be a very intimidating and daunting task. Students carry high anxiety levels in most cases, which influences them in a multitude of ways. Existing school transition research indicates academic achievement and student engagement significantly declining as students move from middle to high school; however, there was little research regarding why students in urban, high-poverty communities experience more academic loss. A more in-depth understanding must be obtained to comprehend the three components of high school readiness: procedural competencies, social-emotional learning, and educational sustainability for urban students in poverty.

Students at E.W. Diggs Academy needed experience with effective transition practices according to previous data and available research. In Chapter One, this study established the need for improving the transition from middle to high school by addressing three key elements to guide the study. Chapter Two provided relevant research exploring effective transition practices and what key components make up the most successful programs. Chapter Three presented the action plan's collaborative development, relevant research, implementation efforts, and evaluation methods for the project. Chapter Four introduced an analysis of the study's evaluation results and how goals were attained. Chapter Five will present the conclusion for this applied

research study, providing details and connections to the research. This chapter will present an interpretation of results, how goals were met, and contributing factors to attaining those goals. Next, I will discuss barriers encountered throughout the implementation of the action plan and limitations that arose.

Lastly, I will address the program evaluation standards to include: Utility, Feasibility, Propriety, Accuracy, and Evaluation Accountability. A conclusion based upon findings will be explained, and recommendations will be made to fit future research implications. Throughout Chapter Five, I will make connections and cite research from Chapter Two regarding my findings. This study's findings will promote continuous improvement by building more robust transition programs across the school and the entire district.

Analysis of Findings

Various areas of support are needed for the successful implementation of middle to high school transition programs. Focusing on the transition from middle school to high school is critical to educators and policymakers because difficult transitions at this stage in a student's career often led to lower student academic achievement and satisfaction levels. Students who have difficulty adjusting to the academic and social demands of high school also experience higher rates of academic failure and achievement loss, attendance issues, feelings of not belonging, and dropping out. The elements used and results presented are not comprehensive of all ways to support the transition to high school, nor do I assert these elements are the only profound practices to increase high school readiness with student transitions. The research reveals numerous factors to consider when building the proper transition program; however, the elements used in this study did influence meeting the set goals.

Academic tutoring.

According to research question number one, Saturday Academy's goal was to increase Language-Arts and Math benchmark scores by 5%. According to research question number two, the long-term goal was to increase Language-Arts and Math TN Ready scores by 5%. Results shared in Chapter Four indicated both goals were achieved without reservation. Using data and research, the team developed a tutoring schedule to accommodate eighth-grade students transitioning to high school. The action plan was created using a collaborative effort; however, adequate financial resources were the determining factor when thinking about resources needed to provide a compelling Saturday Academy.

The team was able to proceed with six four-hour Saturday sessions that occurred once per month. The target students were clear, but the approach around content was not. Saturday Academy required some intense planning and intentionality to ensure this element could impact eighth-grade students preparing to enter high school. The assistant principal, instructional coach, and guidance counselor all met in collaboration with me to determine the length of the program, standards of focus, target students, teacher selection, outcome goals, and the desired budget. After careful review of the previous years' data accompanied by extensive research noted in Chapter Two, the team decided to proceed. The instruction was standards-based and monitored using the informal observation walk-through tool (see Appendix A) to measure its success with students throughout the program.

When considering the staff needed to improve the problem, the team decided to go with two Language Arts teachers and two Math teachers. Using this approach enabled the team to group students by ability and be intentional about the focus standards based on previous assessment data and student needs. Each teacher knew to focus on performance-based objectives

to include one part content and one part higher-order thinking. They also learned to focus on teaching vocabulary explicitly through the lens of the objective to strengthen our students' understanding of academic standards. Sessions concluded in March 2021, and Mastery Connect data was used to determine if the goal was achieved. The tutoring sessions prepared students for academic success with grade-level standards before they transitioned to high school. The sessions also benefited teachers in preparing high-quality instruction focused on performance-based objectives and vocabulary. Next school year, we will begin with a keener focus on this type of teaching every day and during our Saturday Academy.

The students were given a perception survey to measure teacher effectiveness in five categories (see Appendix B) to gauge student perspective of Saturday Academy's overall impact. Students completed surveys on teachers for classroom engagement, classroom learning strategies, rigorous classroom expectations, classroom teacher-student relationships, and pedagogical effectiveness. Findings revealed that teachers were impactful in all five areas reviewed. Students viewed teachers favorably around pedagogical effectiveness, classroom expectations, teacher-student relationships, and classroom strategies. However, classroom engagement was trivial, which can impact content transfer in any subject area. These methods are not the only factors contributing to academic growth, and this study does not all possibilities identified in previous research.

Mentoring initiative.

The Guidance and Advisement Program (GAP) was a pivotal point in this study. As the team continued to follow the research, we created the GAP initiative to fill the social-emotional void in many eighth-grade students. This element was designed to address social-emotional needs before transitioning into high school. The GAP initiative was divided into seven day-long

sessions, addressing various topics throughout the school year. Each teacher or staff member was assigned a group of students to cover each topic. All staff members received training on each subject before the scheduled date during staff meetings. The professional development was divided into modules that included a schedule, learning objectives, videos, and student activities. Ensuring consistency proved to be beneficial when evaluating the element. According to our office referral data and attendance records, the topics covered were those the team identified as being essential areas in our school. After reviewing the available research, it was also determined these topics would be the most beneficial for eighth-grade students as they transition into high school.

There were many contributing factors to the low attendance to include transportation, childcare, and engagement. Mentoring was identified through research as an element that could increase attendance, lower behavior infractions, and be a stable for social-emotional learning. The GAP initiative provided students with new knowledge and strategies to improve self-awareness around social-emotional moments in middle school and their transition into the high school setting. To monitor the impact, the team reviewed chronic absenteeism data and conducted student interviews (see Appendix C). Interviews uncovered that of seven monthly sessions; there was 98% attendance on the days the mentoring was implemented. Several stakeholders helped develop the action plan to include the student council, the assistant principal, guidance counselor, and community adopters. The goal to decrease chronic absenteeism was achieved by more than 2% and at a rate of 59.8%. The GAP will promote student attendance and increase high school readiness from a social-emotional learning perspective for eighth-grade students transitioning to ninth-grade.

Bridge practices.

After reviewing the research, maintaining a collaborative relationship with neighboring high schools proved beneficial in developing this component. In developing the action plan, the team collaborated with two neighboring high schools to build a Bridge Program for students entering ninth-grade. The program was designed to assist students with the day-to-day high school operations in helping with social anxiety. Students often returned to EWDA and shared their experiences throughout high school in the first year. Those stories were very troubling and disheartening. As ninth graders, these students were entering a school environment that was twice their middle school size. Students reported that the large physicals layout their high schools and the increased number of students on the campus created fear and anxiety. Students were experiencing feelings of being lost and being disconnected. This newfound obscurity, coupled with the many unfamiliar faces in their classes, created a strong sense of anxiety. Intensified by the possibility that the class load may be more demanding in high school as subjects increase in difficulty, many students expressed worry and fear about their transition. Summer bridge practices are designed to combat these fears. The Bridge Program was set to begin in March 2021; however, due to COVID-19, this did not occur.

Program Evaluation

This applied research study was evaluated based on the five program evaluation standards: Utility, Feasibility, Propriety, Accuracy, and Accountability. Program evaluation systematically investigates the quality of projects to make decisions based on the new knowledge attained. Such evaluation leads to improvement in response to stakeholder needs (Yarbrough et al., 2011). This section will outline the program evaluation standards and their existence throughout this study.

Evaluation utility is the extent to which program stakeholders find evaluation processes and products valuable in meeting their needs (Yarbrough et al., 2011). In reviewing this study's survey, focus group, and interview results, there was evidence that participants understood the purpose, goals, and importance to the school's overall success. The tutoring sessions were created to improve student academic achievement; however, we saw that it also enhanced teacher effectiveness with the student perception survey. Teachers learned new strategies and developed their content knowledge which ultimately improved their instruction. Administrators, counselors, and teachers gained valuable insight into developing and evaluating an action plan when transitioning students from middle to high school.

Students participated in social-emotional learning through mentoring. They understood the purpose of connecting with staff members in the building and felt comfortable doing so. Participants understood the importance of understanding the various topics covered and who to speak with if any problems surfaced. While the mentoring decreased chronic absenteeism, we did not measure its impact on office referrals due to COVID-19. The unintended focus shifted to mentoring and counseling to improve self-awareness while in the virtual setting.

Yarbrough et al. (2011) describe feasibility as the extent to which resources and other factors allow an evaluation to be conducted in a satisfactory manner. The Saturday Academy and GAP initiatives both require numerous resources to duplicate the success of this study. Although teachers in the building did the tutoring, it took professional development and an hourly stipend to retain them. The benefits for student success would improve teacher ratings and the overall school's success; however, four hours on a Saturday was not part of a teacher's contract. The mentoring took months to plan as we solicited community members to serve as volunteer speakers each month. A partnership with the Memphis Police Department made this easier and

allowed more of the community to be involved. According to the students, the GAP initiative was fun and made them want to attend school regularly. When experiencing challenges, students knew who to see, and they were confident that our staff could improve the situation.

Propriety in a study requires dynamic knowledge of appropriate standards and principles combined with an understanding of contextual elements that further stakeholder benefit, dignity, and self-worth (Yarbrough et al., 2011, p. 108). This evaluation standard speaks directly to the legality and ethics of the program. Before this program could be initiated, the researcher was required to complete Collaborative Instructional Training Initiative (CITI) training. The training contained numerous modules that focused on all students, minors, and participants' protection and rights. Legal stipulations protected federal regulations, informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality, as well as ethical principles. The program description, all protocols, and consent forms were submitted to the University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval in addition to CITI training. The approval also required the consent of the researcher's dissertation chair. Before receiving the final approval, the researcher had to go through a similar IRB process with the school district. All students were selected anonymously, and names were not used to maintain compliance and confidentiality. Each participant was informed of their rights regarding the study and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. All qualitative data obtained from teachers and students during interviews, focus groups, and surveys, remained confidential.

The fourth program evaluation standard is accuracy. Yarbrough et al. (2011) define evaluation accuracy as the truthfulness of evaluation representations, propositions, and findings, especially those that support judgments about the quality of programs or program components. Results should be achieved through sound theory, methods, designs, and reasoning. The data

presented in this study is critical to know how the program can improve high school readiness. All quantitative data in this study can be verified through the school, district, or state database. Survey data was saved in Google forms; however, interviews were not recorded. Focus groups with teachers were recorded and saved for further reference. Informal conversations with students were not documented and only recalled by the researcher. The frequency in which mentors visited the school was confirmed and verified; however, the sessions themselves were not recorded or documented for confidentiality. For future research, more formative data should be collected throughout the process to show gradual improvement leading up to quantitative results. Due to COVID-19 and the hybrid teaching setting, data sources were limited.

The final program evaluation standard is accountability. “Accountability is the responsible use of resources to produce value” (Yarbrough et al., 2011, p. 226). The accountability can also be contributed to the methodology of the study. Each element was thoroughly documented throughout the research and presented in Chapter Three. Administrators, counselors, teachers, and community stakeholders participated in the planning process with the researcher. Quantitative and qualitative data were examined in alignment with the action plan outlined in Chapter Three. The collection of documents and recordings were done electronically and password protected. The researcher only reviewed files to analyze for trends throughout the study. The findings presented in Chapter Four were supported with information collected throughout the evaluation process.

Implications for Future Research

This study was designed to help eighth-grade students become high school ready before the transition. An implication of this research study is that it showed the importance of social-emotional learning in schools' totality. The process of supporting students through mentorships

in this study proved how they could support attendance. Students will miss days from school for various reasons; however, they feel more comfortable facing those issues when attached to a staff member. The mentoring initiative will continue to be defined and should be a separate study. The findings suggest the sessions should occur more often with intentionality. Staff members will need continuous support from the community to support better relationship-building and mental health.

Recommendations

Based on this program's success and the implications, I would recommend the district utilizing this program and the evaluation model for transitions in all middle and high schools. The tutoring sessions provided a lift in student outcomes, but more importantly, they improved the quality of instruction teachers delivered. Teachers now have the ability to push the instructional practices during tutoring in the same sense they would in the classroom daily. Three or more sessions per week are not needed. This study reveals that one practical and intentionally planned session each month can impact academic achievement more than numerous sessions. This confirms the saying, "Quality over quantity."

The student perception survey (see Appendix B) can continue to be used throughout the district and administered multiple times throughout the school year. There will need to be baseline data collected to compare teacher growth in student perception. The classroom observation tool is one that we currently use throughout the district; however, it does not collect information in a way that can be used to coach a teacher around standards-based instruction effectively. The walk-through tool is relevant to monitoring the implementation of initiatives and programs.

To create a continuous improvement cycle, the team would begin planning in the summer for the upcoming eighth-grade cohort. Data gathered from walk-through observations, student interviews, and teacher focus groups will extend the program. Tutoring sessions will begin earlier in the upcoming school year. Students expressed in surveys the lack of engagement. Teachers will receive professional development on student engagement strategies using technology and questioning techniques to improve academic achievement throughout the transition process. The survey will continue to be utilized to strengthen student experiences during Saturday Academy.

The Guidance and Advisement Program should be implemented in every community. Being in a high-poverty school required intense assistance; however, this is an element that can be shaped to fit any school situation. As eighth-grade students mature and learn more about themselves, they can enter high school prepared. The teacher focus group (see Appendix D) revealed how teachers view incoming ninth-grade students and their mindset about their abilities. Teachers reported the lack of maturity and academic proficiency in ninth-graders. Middle and high school teachers must closely align their instruction within the curriculum to ensure no learning break. The shared struggles will allow for more collaboration and meaningful conversation to develop solutions.

To create a continuous improvement cycle around social-emotional learning with GAP, the team will forge more relationships with community stakeholders and constituents. Student attendance will continue to focus on mentoring; however, the team will utilize the student perception results to guide how we can be more effective in meeting their social-emotional needs more consistently. Students voiced how having mentors and discussing sensitive topics made them more comfortable at school, but we want to ensure all student needs are being met. We will

continue decreasing the chronic absenteeism rate each school year with eighth-grade students and providing mentoring so they are maturing upon entering high school. High school teachers in feeder schools will see a difference in students transitioning when adequately welcomed.

The bridge program must take place for students to be thoroughly vetted for high school. In the research, summer bridge programs were noted quite a bit but were not done in this study due to COVID-19. These practices must begin in March with students visiting feeder high schools during times of daily operations. All incoming ninth-graders should be assigned a senior mentor for a proper induction process. In the summer, a minimum of one week should be dedicated to the transitioning eighth-grade students to learn the operations, procedures, and academic demands of the school. The previously mentioned process will reduce anxiety upon entry and improve the school overall. More applied research will need to occur in other areas to improve the quality of transition practices throughout middle schools.

Conclusion

As a leader, I learned the value of collaboration and planning to build cycles of continuous improvement. Working together played a pivotal role in the accomplishments of this study. The relationship amongst community members and constituents was formed in the process of implementing the action plan. The research revealed the many variables impacting the middle to high school transition in high poverty schools. Although the achievement data is still relatively low, the improvements were evident. Students wanted to attend school more and felt more comfortable doing so when concerns surfaced. Being in a virtual setting for most of the project made it somewhat less personable; on the contrary, students were eager to engage each time mentoring and tutoring sessions occurred.

A positive transition from middle to high school is essential to our youth's future academic success and development in high-poverty urban communities. At the start of this study, the program was an idea formed from informal student conversations, but the NEST Level Project was developed by collaborating with various stakeholders. Programs like this can help inform and push our thinking about urban youth graduating from high school and being college or career-ready. Identifying factors that support student transitions and barriers in the community is critical to closing the achievement gap as students transition into the high school setting and society.

Educators and policymakers must seek ways to identify social and cultural capital strategies for students in poverty. Academic potential can be discovered with successful transition practices in collaboration with high schools. If schools want to prevent academic achievement loss, stress, anxiety, and dreadful experiences, they must intervene before the end of the eighth-grade school year. Suppose we do not aggressively support our eighth-grade students and provide them with the knowledge, skills, and experiences outlined in this study; they will continue to follow a path of disengagement, academic failure, and dropout.

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List of Appendices

APPENDIX A

Informal Walk-through Observation Tool

Instructional Practice #1 One: A performance-based objective accessible to students, teachers, and observers linked to the content and a higher-order thinking opportunity or a worthwhile mathematical task.

1.1 Was there a visible objective?

1.1a Was the objective based on a grade-appropriate standard?

1.2 Was the objective flawed, content-driven, or performance-based?

1.3 If it was flawed, how could it have been modified to meet the district-wide expectation for performance-based objectives?

1.4 If it was content-driven, how could it have been modified to meet the district-wide expectation for performance-based objectives?

1.5 If it was performance-based, what qualified the objective as performance-based?

1.6 Could students locate the objective in the classroom? * In a virtual setting, the objective can be on a ppt slide.

1.7 Was the size of the objective helpful to students?

1.8 Was the location of the objective helpful to students. * In a virtual setting, the objective can be on a ppt slide.

- Overall, was a performance-based objective accessible to students, teachers, and observers linked to the content and a higher-order thinking opportunity or a worthwhile task?

- Please provide any context/notes on your overall rating for Instructional Practice #1 here.

Instructional Practice #2 Two: Curriculum-driven opportunities to determine the meaning of general and domain content/specific words and phrases [academic language] before and during reading.

2. Was the objective annotated correctly?

2.1a Was each unfamiliar tier II (general) and tier III (content-specific) word defined?

2.1b If not, which words should have been defined for students?

2.2a Were the definitions accurate?

2.2b Did the teacher use the Tier 2 Educational Epiphany glossary?

2.3 When asked by observers to demonstrate conceptual understanding of the academic language of the objective, were students conversant? * N/A Virtual Environment

2.4 Did students use the 30-30-30 to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words they encountered? (In the text, problem, or in the objective?) * In math, did they use common math-related word parts?

2.5a Did students make use of context clues to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words they encountered? (In the text, problem, or in the objective?) For all subjects but math.

2.6 Did the teacher use point of use annotation to help students make meaning of unfamiliar words they encountered? (In the text, problem, or in the objective?)

2.7 Were students aware that the performance-based objective is a resource to them for understanding the academic language?

2.8 Is there a word-and-definition wall in the classroom or a traditional word wall?

- Overall, were students provided curriculum-driven opportunities to determine the meaning of general and domain content/specific words and phrases [academic language] before and during reading?
- Please provide any context/notes on your overall rating for Instructional Practice #2 here.

APPENDIX B

Student Perception Survey

Classroom Engagement

How attentive and invested students are in class.

Q1: How excited are you about going to this class?

Extremely excited

Quite excited

Somewhat excited

Slightly excited

Not at all excited

Q2: In this class, how eager are you to participate?

Extremely eager 17% 161

Quite eager 27% 263

Somewhat eager 30% 293

Slightly eager 16% 156

Not at all eager 9% 90

Favorable: 39%

Q3: How often do you get so focused on class activities that you lose track of time?

Almost always

Frequently

Sometimes

Once in a while

Almost never

Q4: When you are not in class, how often do you talk about ideas from class?

Almost always

Frequently

Sometimes

Once in a while

Almost never

Q5: Overall, how interested are you in this class?

Extremely interested

Quite interested

Somewhat interested

Slightly interested

Not at all interested

Classroom Learning Strategies

How well students deliberately use strategies to manage their own learning processes in class.

Q1: When you get stuck while learning something new in this class, how likely are you to try a different strategy?

Extremely likely

Quite likely

Somewhat likely

Slightly likely

Not at all likely

Q2: How confident are you that you can choose an effective strategy to get your work for this class done well?

Extremely confident

Quite confident

Somewhat confident

Slightly confident

Not at all confident

Q3: Before you start on a challenging project in this class, how often do you think about the best way to approach the project?

Almost always

Frequently

Sometimes

Once in a while

Almost never

Q4: Overall, how well do your learning strategies help you learn this subject more effectively?

Extremely well

Quite well

Somewhat well

Slightly well

Not well at all

Q5: In this class, how often do you use strategies to learn more effectively?

Almost always

Frequently

Sometimes

Once in a while

Almost never

Classroom Rigorous Expectations

How much students feel that a specific teacher holds them to high expectations around effort, understanding, persistence, and performance in class.

Q1: How often does this teacher take time to make sure you understand material?

Almost Always

Frequently

Sometimes

Once in a while

Almost never

Q2: How often does the teacher make you explain your answer?

Almost Always

Frequently

Sometimes

Once in a while

Almost never

Q3: How much does the teacher encourage you to do your best?

Encourages me a tremendous amount

Encourages me quite a bit

Encourages me some

Encourages me a little

Does not encourage me at all

Q4: Overall, how high are the teacher's expectations of you?

Extremely high

Quite high

Somewhat high

Slightly high

Not high at all

Q5: When you feel like giving up on a difficult task, how likely is it that this teacher will make you keep trying?

Extremely likely

Quite likely

Somewhat likely

Slightly likely

Not at all likely

Classroom Teacher-Student Relationships

How strong the social connection is between teachers and students within and beyond the classroom.

Q1: If you came back to visit class three years from now, how excited would this teacher be to see you?

Extremely excited

Quite excited

Somewhat excited

Slightly excited

Not at all excited

Q2: How respectful is this teacher towards you?

Extremely respectful

Quite respectful

Somewhat respectful

Slightly respectful

Not at all respectful

Q3: When your teacher asks how you are doing, how often do you feel that your teacher is really interested in your answer?

Almost always

Frequently

Sometimes

Once in a while

Almost never

Q4: If you came to class upset, how concerned would your teacher be?

Extremely concerned

Quite concerned

Somewhat concerned

Slightly concerned

Not at all concerned

Q5: How excited would you be to have this teacher again?

Extremely excited

Quite excited

Somewhat excited

Slightly excited

Not at all excited

Pedagogical Effectiveness

Perceptions of the quality of teaching and amount of learning students experience from a particular teacher.

Q1: How much does this teacher know about the topic of his/her class?

A tremendous amount

Quite a bit

Some

A little bit

Almost nothing

Q2: How interesting does this teacher make what you are learning in class?

Extremely interesting

Quite interesting

Somewhat interesting

Slightly interesting

Not at all interesting

Q3: How often does this teacher give you feedback that helps you learn?

Almost always

Frequently

Sometimes

Once in a while

Almost never

Q4: During class, how good is this teacher at making sure students do not get out of control?

Extremely good

Quite good

Somewhat good

Slightly good

Not good at all

Q5: For this class, how clearly does this teacher present the information that you need to learn?

Extremely clearly

Quite clearly

Somewhat clearly

Slightly clearly

Not at all clearly

Q6: How well can this teacher tell whether or not you understand a topic?

Extremely well

Quite well

Somewhat well

Slightly well

Not well at all

Q7: How good is this teacher at teaching in the way that you personally learn best?

Extremely good

Quite good

Somewhat good

Slightly good

Not good at all

Q8: How comfortable are you asking this teacher questions about what you are learning in his/her class?

Extremely comfortable

Quite comfortable

Somewhat comfortable

Slightly comfortable

Not at all comfortable

Q9: Overall, how much have you learned from this teacher about this subject?

Learned a tremendous amount

Learned quite a bit

Learned some

Learned a little bit

Learned almost nothing

APPENDIX C

Student Interview Protocol (8th grade)

Research Topic: The Middle to High School Transition: An Applied Research Study to Improve and Support High School Readiness in High Poverty Schools.

Research Question: What is student perception of high school readiness when making the transition to high school?

Conceptual Framework: high school readiness, academic achievement, social-emotional learning, transition practices

Statement of Consent: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today about your transition experience in middle school as you prepare for high school. The information you share with me will be used to help me better understand the key factors that contribute to high school readiness and improve our transition practices to build an efficient transition program. Please be assured that your personal information will not be included in any reports or findings. I want you to feel comfortable and openly share your thoughts and perceptions. Are you willing to proceed with this interview?

Student Interview Questions:

Icebreakers

1. How old are you?
2. What part of town are you from?
3. What high school would you like to attend?

High School Readiness

4. How difficult was it to find your classes in middle school?
 - a. Did you get lost?
 - b. Was there someone available to assist in the beginning?
5. Was it difficult for you to find and to open your locker?
6. Were you able to locate restrooms near your classes?
7. How difficult was it to travel from class to class without being late?
8. How would you describe your experience in the cafeteria?
 - a. How were students called up?
 - b. Did you know where to sit?
 - c. How were the food choices?
9. How did you feel about making new friends?
10. Have you been in a situation where you felt you were teased or bullied?
 - a. If so, what happened?

Transition Practices

11. Are you looking to visit any high schools before you transition to 9th grade?
12. Are you familiar with school procedures that may change when entering high school?
13. Do you participate in any athletics or performing arts?
14. Were you assigned a student mentor when you arrived at middle school? Do you think it would be helpful when entering high school?

Academic Achievement

15. How difficult is it to make good grades?
16. How do teachers support you in your work with long-term projects and homework?
What would you need them to do differently for high school?
17. Do you feel the work is more challenging or requires more effort as you are promoted to higher grade levels?
18. What is your perception of teacher expectations for high school in different classes/subject areas?
- 19.

Closing Question

20. Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX D

Focus Group Protocol (High School Teachers)

Research Topic: The Middle to High School Transition: An Applied Research Study to Improve and Support High School Readiness in High Poverty Schools.

Research Question: What is teacher perception of high school readiness for students transitioning to high school?

Conceptual Framework: high school readiness, academic achievement, social-emotional learning, transition practices

Statement of Consent: Good evening, and welcome to our session. Thank you for taking the time to join us in discussing middle to high school transition programs in Shelby County Schools. My name is Robert Davis, II and assisting me is (name of individual). We're both with the University of Mississippi. I am conducting a study. The information you share with me will help me better understand the key factors contributing to high school readiness and improve our transition practices to build an efficient transition program. Please be assured that your personal information will not be included in any reports or findings. I want to know what you think works well, what does not, and how programs might be improved. You were invited because you educate high school students and have seen many transition practices. There are no wrong answers but rather various points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. Keep in mind that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful. I will be recording the session because I don't want to miss any of your comments. People often say beneficial things in these discussions, and we can't write fast enough to get them all down. If you prefer to be called by your first name, please let us know. I will not use any names in my reports.

I will minimize the risk of your responses being shared by having you answer these questions via conference call and by discussing the importance of confidentiality with the entire group at the start to keep your identity from being compromised. The reports will assist in the planning of future transition practices and programs. Are you willing to proceed with this focus group interview? Well, let's begin!

Icebreaker

We've placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember each other's names. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the table. Tell us your name, what school you currently serve, and where you are originally from.

Teacher Focus Group Questions:

High School Readiness/Social-Emotional Learning

1. What are the most important factors for incoming 9th-grade students being prepared for high school? Let's chart your ideas.
2. How is student behavior with incoming 9th-grade students?
 - a. Do they lack maturity?
 - b. Social and emotional barriers?
3. How do students do with navigating the facility?
 - a. Do they ask several questions in the beginning?
 - b. Are there problems with tardiness?
4. During your observation, are students having complications finding new friends?
 - a. Is there teasing and bullying taking place from upper-classmen?

5. Have you taught in middle school before?
 - a. When was the last time you visited an 8th grade activity?
 - b. What is/was your perception of student behavior?

Transition Practices

6. How have you been involved in the process of welcoming incoming 9th-grade students?
7. Do students have an opportunity to spend time with you throughout the Summer for any length of time in the school setting?
8. Think back over years and things that your high school did to vet incoming freshmen.
What went particularly well?
 - a. What needs improvement?
9. Suppose you were in charge and could make one change that would make the transition program better. What would you do?

Academic Achievement

10. Tell me about positive experiences you've had with 9th-grade students entering prepared academically?
11. Tell me about disappointments you've had with Freshman academic performance?
12. What are your main concerns around academics when a student enters high school in 9th grade?
13. Let's list these on a flip chart. If you must choose one factor contributing to student academic success the most, what would it be?
14. How do you (or your school) support students entering the 9th grade performing below grade-level standards?

Closing Questions

15. Of all the things we discussed today, what do you feel is the most important?
16. Have we missed anything? (After reviewing the purpose of study once more)

Vita

Education:

- **Bachelors in Liberal Studies, Elementary Education/Sociology, 2009**
The University of Memphis, Memphis, TN
- **Masters of Arts in Teaching, Special Education Curriculum and Instruction - Modified K-12, 2012** Christian Brothers University, Memphis, TN
- **Masters of Science in Educational Leadership, Beginning Administrative Leadership License- K-12, 2014.** Christian Brothers University, Memphis, TN
- **Doctorate in Educational Leadership, Educational Leadership, 2021**
The University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS

Certificate:

- Beginning Administrative Leadership License- K-12, 2014
- Professional License, Endorsement: 460 Sped Modified K-12, 2018
- Apprentice License, Endorsement: 460 Sped Modified K-12 2012
- Transitional License, Endorsement: 460 Sped Modified K-12, 2010

Honors and Awards:

- Rookie of the Year, Department of Exceptional Children, 2010-11
- Teacher of Month, Northwest Prep Academy, Oct. 2010,
- Teacher of Month, Northwest Prep Academy, Nov. 2011,
- Nominated for The Fishman Prize for Superlative Classroom Practice, 2012
- Nominated for The Fishman Prize for Superlative Classroom Practice, 2013
- Teacher Recognition for Outstanding Service to Students, Parents, and Staff, Northwest Prep Academy, Feb. 2014
- Mentor of the Year, 2019, 2020
- Principal of the Year Nominee, 2019

Relevant Experience:

- **Certified and Highly Qualified Teacher and School Leader, Praxis Tests Successfully Completed Include:** Education of Exceptional Students: Core Content Knowledge, SPED Core Knowledge and Mild to Moderate Applications, Elementary Education: Content Knowledge, Reading Across the Curriculum: Elementary, Principles of Learning and Teaching- Secondary Education, and The School Leadership Series: School Leaders Licensure Assessment for Educational Leadership.

Other Experiences/ Community Involvement:

- Mentor for Kappa Days of Caring, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., 2009-present
- Volunteer for The Exceptional Foundation of West Tennessee, 2010
- Mentor for Memphis Junior Golf Program, 2013
- Advisor for Kappa Leadership League, 2013
- Homebound Sped Teacher, 2013,14
- New Leaders, New Schools- Emerging Leaders Program, 2017
- Mentor for Developing Noble Men (D.N.A.) Non-Profit 2018-present)
- Leadership Memphis-Fast-Track Graduate, 2019

Presentations:

- Presented at the East Tennessee SPED Conference 2012, Nashville, TN
 - Closing Achievement Gap
 - Managing Student Behavior
 - Assessing Student with Disabilities
- Presented at the West Tennessee SPED Conference 2013, Memphis, TN
 - Common Core State Standards
 - Co-teaching Methods/Strategies for Inclusion

Professional Associations: 2009-present

- MEA-Memphis Education Association
- NTA-National Teacher Association
- TPA-Tennessee Principals Association

Research/Current Research: 2010-current

- Educational Leadership/Instructional Leadership Strategies
- Educational Policy and Procedures
- Teacher/Student Relationships and Student Achievement
- Philosophy of Curriculum and Instruction
- The Continuous Improvement Cycle (PLC's, Data Driven Instruction, Professional Development, and Student Achievement)
- Educational Law
- Teacher Morale and its Effect on Student Achievement
- Human Capital/Talent Management
- The Middle to High School Transition