ABSTRACT

Brendan Gartner, A FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESSFULLY TRANSITIONING STUDENTS INTO THE MIDDLE GRADES (Under the direction of Dr. Jim McDowelle). Department of Educational Leadership, May 2018.

This Problem of Practice dissertation addresses the need for an elementary to middle school transition program in a school district in eastern North Carolina. To develop this program, district end-of-grade assessment results and suspension data was collected and feedback was amassed from district students, their caregivers, teachers, and school administrators. Input from students and their caregivers was gathered through a series of online questionnaires. Teacher data was collected via an online survey and school administrator feedback was gathered using a focus group interview. Stakeholder feedback was coupled with theories and strategies available through the body of literature surrounding middle school transitions to create the framework for a comprehensive middle grades transition plan that addresses the needs of stakeholders unique to this district. The developed framework provides mandatory activities for district schools to undertake along with recommended research-based strategies to assist schools in implementing the required elements of this transition plan. Recommended strategies for students, their caregivers, and teachers include suggested programs to be undertaken prior to students transitioning from grade five to grade six, programs to offer during the summer between elementary and middle school, and suggested strategies to implement once students have started in the middle grades. The study concludes with recommended changes to practice and policy specific to this district in order to provide students with additional transitional supports.

A FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESSFULLY TRANSITIONING STUDENTS

INTO THE MIDDLE GRADES

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

Brendan Gartner

May, 2018

A FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESSFULLY TRANSITIONING STUDENTS

INTO THE MIDDLE GRADES

by

Brendan Gartner

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF DISSERTATION:_____
Jim McDowelle, EdD

COMMITTEE MEMBER:_____
William Rouse Jr., EdD

COMMITTEE MEMBER:_____
Marjorie Ringler, EdD

COMMITTEE MEMBER:_____
Kathy Spencer, EdD

COMMITTEE MEMBER:_____
Barry Collins, EdD

INTERIM CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP:

_____
Marjorie Ringler, EdD

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL:

_____
Paul Gemperline, PhD

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife Denise and my daughter Molly. They are the two most amazing people in the world to me and without their infinite patience, unwavering support, and unconditional love, the completion of this journey would not have been possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my dissertation committee chair, Dr. Jim McDowelle and fellow committee member and East Carolina University faculty member Dr. William Rouse Jr. for their guidance through the dissertation process. I would also like to thank committee member Dr. Kathy Spencer, who fostered and nurtured my role as an instructional leader and Dr. Barry Collins, whose support and advice has been invaluable.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Need for the Study

A Framework for Successfully Transitioning Students into the Middle Grades

Let me just say for the record that I think middle school is the dumbest idea ever invented.

You got kids like me who haven't hit their growth spurt yet mixed in with

these gorillas who need to shave twice a day.

-Jeff Kinney, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, 2007

The transition to middle school is a challenge that most people who have attended public school have had to face (Association for Middle Level Education, 2002). To use the analogy of the popular children's game *Chutes and Ladders*, students spend their entire elementary school career ascending to the top of the childhood social ladder, only to find themselves suddenly back at the bottom of the hierarchical chute as they enter middle school, needing once again to start climbing the ladder from the lowest rung. This dramatic shift in social status is often accompanied by horror stories and urban legends told by mischievous older siblings and their friends or older neighborhood children. They share tales of bullies and innocent sixth-graders caught in the wrong bathroom on the wrong day or stuffed into their lockers. This is compounded by other pressing concerns that rising sixth-graders themselves envision, such as insurmountable mountains of homework, getting lost in a huge new school building, or being unable to open their lockers (even if they might get stuffed inside.)

While adults may look back wryly on these stories, they are genuine concerns for rising sixth-grade students that bring with them real consequences. The transition to middle school is all too frequently met with a significant decline in academic performance (Alspaugh, 1998; Schwerdt & West, 2013) and intrinsic motivation (Ryan, Shim, & Makara, 2013). Kingery,

Erdley, and Marshall (2011) asserted that students entering middle school often displayed losses in self-esteem and interest in school in general. Research has also uncovered a correlation between students who demonstrated significant difficulty with the transition from elementary school to middle school and an increased probability of those students dropping out of high school (Alspaugh, 1998; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Balfanz, 2009). There is hope, however. Properly designed comprehensive transition activities that effectively meet the needs of students can have long-lasting positive effects on students progressing into the middle grades (Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Mac Iver, 1990).

The transition from elementary school to middle school can present a variety of challenges to students, their families, and educators (Akos & Galassi, 2004). For many, this transition represents a child's first steps into young adulthood (Association for Middle Level Education, 2002). The educational experience for many students prior to middle school is limited to the relatively cloistered confines of the elementary school. Students spend most of their day with one teacher aside from enrichment classes such as art, music, and physical education. They associate with the same assemblage of children throughout the school year and remain with this group even as they engage in school-related activities outside of their classrooms.

Once students transition to middle school, however, their educational experience can be drastically different from what they encountered during elementary school. They may have different teachers for every subject with a unique group of students in every class and setting. Students may find themselves in social situations with peers from different elementary schools from different regions of the surrounding community, presenting students with the potential for interacting with students from unfamiliar cultures, backgrounds, or upbringings. Middle school students are expected to display a level of independence that has not been previously required of

2

them (Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Goldstein, Boxer, & Rudolph, 2015; Ryan et al., 2013). Students experience unfamiliar social and organizational pressures (Akos, 2004; Andrews & Bishop, 2012). It is little surprise that as students transition from elementary school to middle school, they find themselves burdened by what Tilleczek, Laflamme, Ferguson, Edney, Girard, Cudney, and Cardoso (2007) referred to as a "paradox of hope and fear" (p. 164).

The transition from elementary school to middle school and the challenges that accompany it are well-represented in the literature (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 1998; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Eccles, Roeser, Vida, Fredricks, & Wigfield, 2006; Yoon, Malu, Schaefer, Reyes, & Brinegar, 2015). Despite the clear connection between the effects of the transition from elementary school to middle school and the long-term ramifications on student success, the school district that is the focus of this Problem of Practice dissertation lacks a comprehensive plan for transitioning students from grade five to grade six. The absence of a clear and common vision to address the student transition to middle school has led to a hodgepodge of orientation activities directed by the individual middle schools with no true district-wide plan to address the myriad of challenges about to confront the rising middle school students.

District Characteristics

This district is a relatively large school system in North Carolina. It is a combination of an urban center surrounded by large swaths of rural landscape. According the district's website, it is comprised of 37 public schools including 20 elementary schools, eight middle schools, seven high schools, one early childhood education center, and one alternate learning center all of which serve a total population of approximately 26,000 students. At any given time, up to 46% of the student population in the district are children of families that are financially dependent on the

federal government through a parent or guardian that is active duty military or employed as a civilian on the federal installation. The large number of students whose families are subject to regular relocation in accord with their military service leads to a high degree of transience in the student population. This transience carries over to the teaching workforce as well, as the district can turn over as many as 200 teachers in any given year.

Students in this district exhibit a lack of appropriate progress on standardized tests after they have transitioned from elementary school to middle school. The literature indicates that this is not an uncommon phenomenon (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 1998; Balfanz, 2009; Eccles et al., 2006; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; McGill, Hughes, Alicea, & Way, 2012; Schwerdt & West, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, 2008). Students in this district, however, seem to have a greater degree of academic difficulty during this transition when compared to their peers across North Carolina. Student proficiency as measured by state assessments in reading demonstrate that students in this district who transition from elementary school to middle school exhibit little progress and they do not show the same gains in proficiency as their peers statewide (see Table 1). In mathematics, student proficiency in this district decreases significantly from grades five and six (see Table 1). While students across the state demonstrate declines in mathematics proficiency after the transition to the middle grades, losses in proficiency are much more pronounced with students from this district. Difficulty with behavioral expectations after the transition to middle school are evidenced through trends in student discipline data. Students in this district demonstrated a dramatic increase in out-of-school suspensions after they transitioned from grade five to grade six (see Table 2).

Table 1

Comparison of State and District Proficiency as Determined by North Carolina End of Grade

Tests

	Reading		Math	
	State % GLP	District % GLP	State % GLP	District % GLP
2013-2014 Grade 5	53.8	51.9	56.4	52.9
2014-2015 Grade 6	57.2	52	48.5	35.8
Difference	3.4	0.1	-7.9	-17.1
2014-2015 Grade 5	53	54.6	57.5	53.8
2015-2016 Grade 6	58.7	56.7	52	42.9
Difference	5.7	2.1	-5.5	-10.9
2015-2016 Grade 5	55.4	54.6	60.4	52.1
2016-2017 Grade 6	61	61.1	53.1	42.8
Difference	5.6	6.5	-7.3	-9.3
Average Change	4.9	2.9	-6.9	-12.3

Note. GLP is Grade Level Proficiency as determined by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. From Public Schools of North Carolina (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017a).

Table 2

Comparison of Short-Term Suspension Rates

	Short Term Suspensions	Suspension Days	Average Length of Suspension (Days)
2013-2014 Grade 5	105	200	1.9
2014-2015 Grade 6	248	624	2.5
2015-2015 Grade 5	112	213	1.9
2015-2016 Grade 6	241	615	2.6
2015-2016 Grade 5	156	248	1.6
2016-2017 Grade 6	264	649	2.5
Average			
2013-2016 Grade 5	124.3	220.3	1.8
2014-2017 Grade 6	251	629.3	2.5

Note. Short-term suspensions are those in which students are not permitted to attend school or school functions for ten days or less.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the less than desirable results illustrated on state-mandated standardized testing and an increase in disciplinary issues with students who progress to middle school in this district, the transition from the elementary school to middle school has largely been left unaddressed at the district level. It is primarily directed by the individual schools, with little commonality between programs, little to suggest that the strategies they employ are evidence-based, and no indication that these programs are based on the needs of students, parents, or educators. The district limits its involvement in the transition to middle to school to the organization of middle school visits and the coordination of transportation for these visits. No other transition activities are actively supported.

With no clear direction or vision, students may be largely ill-prepared for the drastic changes in their educational experiences as they transfer into the middle grades. This lack of preparedness leads to an increase in student discipline issues, and changes in academic proficiencies as measured on end-of-grade tests that either lag behind their peers statewide or demonstrate significant declines. These struggles could lead to student disengagement in the educational process as described by Ryan et al. (2013) and Kingery et al. (2011).

Purpose of the Study

This study addressed the Problem of Practice outlined above by creating the framework of a transition plan for students in this district who are progressing from the elementary school to the middle grades. The use of Improvement Science to create a plan to transition students in this district from elementary school to middle school was particularly well-suited to this study as incorporating qualitative data such as the thoughts and feelings of the affected stakeholders is essential to building a successful transition plan (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Descriptive statistics

such as student achievement scores and discipline data were analyzed separately from the qualitative data and the two data strands will then be synthesized to form the rationale and foundation for the interventions resulting in the framework for a middle school transition plan.

The theory supporting this study holds that the creation of properly designed and comprehensive transition activities for rising sixth-graders will have a positive effect on students' perceptions of their middle school experience, student engagement, increased academic performance, and reduced suspensions in the sixth grade. This may then have a long-lasting positive effect on students through the remainder of the middle grades and high school.

Goal of the Study

The goal of this Problem of Practice was to create the framework of a transition plan for students in this district that are progressing from grade five to grade six. This framework for this plan was constructed based upon available descriptive statistics, stakeholder needs, and the body of available research and was designed to be comprehensive in nature. This means that such a transition plan framework would address the needs of students, parents, and educators and address those needs across the transition beginning during fifth-grade until well after the students have started grade six.

Study Questions

To create the framework for a comprehensive middle grades transition plan, there were several questions that were considered. First, what are the primary foci of students, parents and teachers in this district prior to students transitioning from elementary school to middle school? Second, how can the body of available research be utilized to effectively address those issues? Finally, how can the answers to the first two questions be successfully synthesized to devise interventions that will form the framework of a middle school transition plan in this district?

Overview of the Study Design

The study was conducted utilizing Improvement Science and incorporated qualitative data and descriptive statistics in order to create the framework of a plan to transition students in this district from elementary school to middle school. Qualitative data from questionnaires and focus group interviews was paired with descriptive statistics gleaned from surveys, test data, and suspension data to form the basis of the interventions presented in the transition plan. It is intended that this transition plan will better prepare students for the progression from elementary to middle school and will provide them with better prospects of success in the middle grades and beyond.

Input from all stakeholders is essential in the formation of any middle grades transition plan (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Koppang, 2004; Yoon et al., 2015). The stakeholders queried for this study included students, their caregivers, teachers, and school administrators. Student, teacher, and parent input was gathered via surveys and questionnaires that were conducted several times during the final nine weeks of students' fifth grade year and the end of the first nine weeks of their sixth-grade year. Administrative feedback was gathered through a focus group interview. Those data were coupled with the available body of research and appropriate interventions were developed that addressed stakeholders' perceived challenges, benefits, and pivotal moments in the transition from elementary school to middle school. These interventions were organized into the framework of a transition plan that demonstrates a clear vision for the successful progression of students from grade five to grade six.

Figure 1 is an expanded logic model listing the elements of the conventional approach to detailing the scope and sequence of a study of this nature. A vertical display was chosen (in contrast to the more usual horizontal orientation) in order to maximize the legibility of the figure.

9

Outcomes
Implementation of the strategies described in the transition plan will positively affect student achievement on grade six state assessments. There will also be a decrease in short term suspensions at the middle grade level.

Impact
If the plan to transition students from fifth grade to sixth grade is effective, student achievement will increase and short-term suspensions will decrease. These improvements would hopefully improve students' long term educational opportunities through an increase four-year cohort graduation rates and also result in an overall increase in the positive public perception of the district.

Resources
Qualitative data needed:
Stakeholder surveys, administrative interviews, and stakeholder survey data from respondents. Stakeholders include grade five and grade six students, their caregivers, their teachers, and appropriate school administrators.
Survey data will include open-ended queries, Likert-style rating scales, and short answer responses.
Quantitative data needed:
Historical student achievement data that is available through the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), student discipline data and student demographic data which is available through the PowerSchool student information system.

Activities
Stakeholders were asked to participate in data collection on four occasions. Data, such as survey and questionnaire responses was collected from fifth grade students in three phases during the final nine weeks of their fifth-grade year and once after they transitioned to sixth grade. Parents were surveyed prior to and after students transitioned to middle school. Fifth and sixth-grade teachers were surveyed the end of the academic year. An administrative focus group was interviewed at the end of the first nine-week period of the transition year for the students involved in this study. This data gathering informed further research into the development of the framework an effective program to address the transition from grade five to grade six.
Student achievement data and discipline data was utilized in order to provide a rationale for the plan.

Outputs
The output was the creation of framework of a middle grades transition plan that can be implemented within this district that will have positive effects on student achievement and their success in the middle grades in general.

Figure 1. Logic Model.

The first questionnaire was provided to students and parents near the start of the final grading period of the student's fifth grade year. As recommended by Akos (2002), grade five students and their caregivers were provided the opportunity to supply their input via open-ended questions about their concerns and perceived benefits of progressing to the middle grades. This information was coded, tabulated, and categorized into common themes (Akos, 2002). Students were also administered a questionnaire with Likert-style prompts regarding academic, relational, and organizational matters. Student caregivers were provided similar surveys with both the open-ended queries and Likert-style prompts.

This process of collecting student information via surveys was conducted twice more during the remainder of students' fifth-grade year. Both parents and students were administered the original Likert-style surveys after students had attended middle school for approximately six weeks. Elementary and middle school administrators were interviewed as a focus group. Through this process, the data collected was used to determine commonalities in stakeholder concerns and perceived benefits and used to develop interventions that, when coupled with available research, formed a plan designed to prepare students for the challenges that they face as they progress from elementary to middle school and for future scholastic success. Fifth and sixth grade staff were asked to provide feedback about the middle school transition after the conclusion of the academic year. The surveys included questions that asked staff to consider student perceptions about the transition to middle school. These surveys also included inquiries about activities that teachers would find productive in preparing students for the middle grades and provided teachers the opportunity to suggest best practices for the student transition to middle school.

Summary

Success or failure in middle school is often a key indicator of student's long-term success (Balfanz, 2009). Their experiences in middle school can have a profound effect on the high school dropout rate and therefore college and career readiness (Balfanz, 2009). The drastic decrease in student achievement in math and the equally drastic rise in short-term suspensions after students exit elementary school that occurs in this district as illustrated by data published by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction could be a symptom of the lack of a coherent transition plan for students progressing to the middle grades (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017a). The implementation of a well-designed, research-based, comprehensive transition plan will create a clear and common vision to optimize district students' chances for success. This would go a long way towards fulfilling the district's stated mission of "preparing students to be globally competitive leaders and responsible citizens."

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Middle School Movement

Studies as far back as the 1960s noted a need for greater attention to the student progression from elementary school to middle school (Mullins & Irvin, 2000). It is this period of time that Schaefer, Malu, and Yoon (2016) referred to as the beginning of the *middle school movement*. At this movement progressed, the need for a more effective transition between elementary school and high school began to gain prominence. William M. Alexander (1963) first proposed that *junior high schools* be renamed and restructured as *middle schools*. He recognized that the junior high school model was a bridge between elementary school and high school in name only and expressed doubts as to the efficacy of the junior high school model (Alexander, 1963). During the 1970s, the middle school movement gained momentum, but there remained rigorous debate about the effectiveness of the middle school model as opposed to junior high schools (Schaefer et al., 2016).

As the middle school movement progressed into the 1980s, it continued to gain support. There were changes in teacher preparation programs, educational practices, and concepts that provided a focus on middle level education (Schaefer et al., 2016). It was during this decade that the middle school movement's platform coalesced into policy statements by national organizations such as the National Middle School Association's (NMSA, 1982) *This We Believe*, which clearly defined the central tenets of the middle school movement. The principles defined by this document included strategies such as creating organizational structures that maximized meaningful relationships and instructional opportunities, guidance and support services tailored to the needs of adolescents, adult mentoring and advocacy, and the recruitment and training of educators dedicated to students in the middle grades (NMSA, 1982). By the end of the 1980s

there had been a marked increase in the number of schools classified as middle schools as opposed to junior high schools. In the late 1960s there were approximately 1,000 schools that adhered to the middle school concept as it existed at the time (Schaefer et al., 2016). As the 1980s drew to a close, there were over 5,000 schools that had been specifically designed as middle schools or had abandoned the junior high concept (Schaefer et al., 2016).

By the early 1990s over 80% of early adolescent students nationwide attended a middle school as opposed to a junior high school (Schaefer et al., 2016). It was during this decade that the focus turned to the organization and structure of the middle school environment that would best serve student needs (Schaefer et al., 2016). Much of this structure was based on a report from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (Schaefer et al., 2016). This report, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, described and promoted a wide array of organizational structures such as small learning communities with interdisciplinary teaching teams, common planning times, and staffing middle schools with professionals who are experts in teaching early adolescents (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). It was during this decade that practices such as student advisories, cooperative learning, and differentiation in instruction moved to the forefront of middle grades education (Schaefer et al., 2016).

At the onset of the 2000s, new federal mandates turned the attention of school districts across the nation to high stakes testing and measurable outcomes (Schaefer et al., 2016). The focus on standardized tests and federally mandated curricula were viewed as significant obstacles to the success of the middle school movement (Smith & McEwin, 2011). In their survey of over 200 middle level educators, Faulker and Cook (2006) found that a vast majority felt that high stakes testing was the greatest impediment to implementing best practices for educating early

14

adolescents. As middle grades education has progressed to the present day, there remains a focus on research-based best practices and professional development to strengthen early adolescent education (Schaefer et al., 2016).

It is little wonder that so much time and effort has been spent reforming middle grades education. As cited by Calvert (2011), Robert Belfanz referred to middle school as the most important years in the education of a child and the best chance for educators to reform outcomes for students. Balfanz (2009) also pronounced middle school as critical to a student's long-term success. As described by Goldstein et al. (2015), a stressful transition to middle school was correlated with academic struggles and higher anxiety about school in general. It is essential, then, that schools work to minimize the stress of the transition from elementary to middle school. This critical period in a child's education occurs just as students are experiencing a multitude of other changes in their lives. Fortunately, the middle school movement has led to an increasing amount of research being devoted to the transition from elementary to middle school (Akos, Rose, & Orthner, 2015).

The Changing Student

The World Health Organization (2016) defined adolescence as "a time period of development and growth that occurs after childhood and before adulthood, from ages 10 to 19." The rate at which people grow and develop during this time is rapid, and is second only to infancy in this regard (World Health Organization, 2016). The physical changes that occur as adolescence progresses is readily apparent to anyone who observes the differences between many sixth graders just entering middle school compared with the eighth graders preparing to leave it. The changes that take place during adolescence, however, are much more complex than just a physical metamorphosis. Children also endure changes in cognitive functions and social

15

and emotional development (Arim, Tramonte, Shapka, Dahinten, & Willms, 2011; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). Many adolescent children experience social pressures to engage risk-taking behaviors such as tobacco, drug and alcohol use and sexual activity for the first time in their lives (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995). The social dynamics between students and their peers and their parents can change drastically during adolescence (McGill et al., 2012). These behaviors can be even more pronounced in those children who enter puberty and adolescence earlier than their peers, which is becoming a more common occurrence (Arim et al., 2011). All of these factors combined with the transition to an entirely unfamiliar school environment can have profound effects on students and their educational success (Kieffer, Marinell, & Nuegebauer, 2014).

The challenges that face students as they transition from elementary school to middle school are not a solely American phenomenon. School systems around the world that have similar school structures to the United States have recognized that the middle school transition is fraught with difficulties (Andrews & Bishop, 2012). Negative experiences with the progression from elementary to middle school can have far-reaching ramifications for all students, regardless of culture. As Balfanz (2009) stated, "a student's middle grades experience is critical to his or her life's chances" (p. 13).

It has been well-documented that the transition from elementary school to the middle grades is often accompanied by a decline in academic performance and an increase in undesirable or risk-taking behaviors (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 1998; Balfanz, 2009; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995; Eccles et al., 2006; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; McGill et al., 2012; Schwerdt & West, 2013; U.S. Department of Education,

16

Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, 2008). There are a number of reasons that many students have difficulty with this transition.

During adolescence, the student's brain undergoes significant development (Choundhury, Blakemore, & Charman, 2006; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). Scans of the adolescent brain have shown that those areas of the brain that are thought to have influence of social cognition, such as the pre-frontal cortex, undergo the most significant changes (Choundhury et al., 2006, McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). These changes lead to an increased interest in other people, but also an increased awareness of their opinions, including classmates and teachers, as they relate to a student's self-image and identity (Choundhury et al., 2006; Erath, Bub, & Tu, 2014; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). Adolescents begin to make more independent decisions and distance themselves from the influence of their parents and are more prone to impulsive behaviors (Choundhury et al., 2006; McGill et al., 2012; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; National Institute of Mental Health, 2011; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). Such changes make resisting social pressures and risk-taking behaviors much more difficult for adolescents than for young children and adults (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015).

As their brain develops, particularly the pre-frontal cortex, middle grades students begin to develop higher-order and critical thinking skills (Choundhury et al., 2006; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). Steinberg (2011) described brain development during this time not only as growth but also as reorganization. Caskey and Ruben (2003) and Steinberg (2011) referred to this reorganization as synaptic pruning. This process, in which older, less relevant synaptic connections are removed and new ones are created, leads to the development of

17

critical thinking, planning, the balance of risk and reward for behaviors, and cognitive advances which must be constantly reinforced if they are to develop properly (Caskey & Ruben, 2003; Steinberg 2011, 2015).

The changes in that occur in the adolescent brain are accompanied by substantial changes beyond growth in size and synaptic development. During adolescence, children become sexually mature (McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; World Health Organization, 2016). The onset of physical maturity and the presence of sexual hormones can have a significant effect on a student's behavior and social interactions (McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; National Institute of Mental Health, 2011). The presence of sexual hormones that leads to these changes are often accompanied by stress hormones that can lead to impulsivity and an increase in the intensity of reactions to emotional stimuli (McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015; National Institute of Mental Health, 2011). Additionally, there is no timetable for adolescent development (McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). Students may find themselves maturing at a much slower rate than their classmates, leading to additional stressors (Gilewski & Nunn, 2016).

Along with the biological and psychosocial issues that accompany adolescence, students must cope with a drastically different learning environment when they transition from elementary school to the middle grades (Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Koppang, 2004; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). After transitioning to middle school, students may find that their educational experience is considerably different from what they had become accustomed to in elementary school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 1998; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Elementary schools are often physically confining, with students associating

with a limited number of students in a small section of the school building throughout the day (Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Movement throughout the school is often supervised by an adult and students are carefully monitored as they traverse from one area of the school to another (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Students may spend most of the school day with one teacher with the exception of enrichment classes. Middle school students are expected to display a level of independence that had not been previously required of them in their academic work and their conduct in and out of the classroom (Alspaugh, 1998; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Further, there is a pervasive sense of greater responsibility and individual accountability (Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Goldstein et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2013). This new educational environment, coupled with unfamiliar social pressures and physiological and emotional changes only exacerbates the difficulties associated with adolescence (Andrews & Bishop, 2012).

The changes that take place in young adolescents entering the middle grades may have a profound effect on student academic performance. Students often experience a decline in performance as they transition from elementary school to the middle grades and this is well represented in the literature (Alspaugh, 1998; Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Ecles et al., 2006; Kim, Schwartz, Cappella, & Seidman, 2014; McGill et al., 2012; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Akos et al. (2015) described how this decline can be more pronounced based on gender, race, or socioeconomic status. Andrews and Bishop even cautioned that the transition can be so difficult for some students that they actually "unlearn" previously known skills making academic success

that much more difficult. The decline in academic performance for some students that is described in the literature seems to come to fruition in this district.

From 2014 to 2017, this district demonstrated a 2.9% increase in the number of students progressing from grade five to grade six who were determined to be grade-level proficient in reading as measured on state assessments (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017a). Statewide during this same period, there was an average 4.9% increase in the number of students considered grade-level proficient (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017a). The differences in mathematics proficiency was even more dramatic. From 2014 to 2017, the district has averaged a 12.3% decrease in the number of students transitioning from grade five to grade six considered grade-level proficient in mathematics, compared with statewide 6.9% average decline in the number of students deemed grade level proficient during the same period of time (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017a) (see Table 1).

Similar discrepancies between grades five and six was found in the LEA discipline data pertaining to short-term suspensions. North Carolina General Statute §115C-390.1 (2013) defined a short-term suspension as the exclusion from school for disciplinary purposes for a period of up to ten days. Short-term suspensions increased drastically when students in this district progressed from grade five to grade six. According data maintained by in the district student information system, there was a marked increase in student short-term suspensions from grade five to grade six. From 2014 through 2017, there was an average of approximately 124 short-term suspensions per year issued to fifth grade students while the average number of short-

term suspensions for sixth grade students increased to 251 issued per year. The average length of short-term suspensions also increased as fifth grade short term suspensions averaged 1.8 days in length, while sixth grade suspensions averaged 2.5 days in length (see Table 2).

The Middle School Transition

The literature supports the idea that an effective transition from elementary school to middle school is essential to students' long-term student success (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Andrews, 2011; Balfanz, 2009; Kieffer et al., 2014; Tilleczek et al., 2007). It is critical that middle grades transition programs begin well before students move to middle school, and that these programs should continue after students are settled into their middle school community (Allen, 2001; Koppang, 2004). As an illustration of the importance of schools taking a lead in the middle grades transition, Lorain (2002), in a survey of sixth grade students, found that most of what students expected during the transition from elementary from middle school was gleaned not from educators, but from parents, siblings, and neighbors. The disinformation received from these sources only increased students stress about moving to the middle grades (Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Lorain, 2002). To avoid the pitfalls that could result from these misunderstandings, students must be made aware of what to expect long before they make this transition (Allen, 2001).

Changes such as increased academic rigor, a heightened awareness of social pressures, and changes in the school environment, such as larger class sizes, can lead to students becoming disengaged in school with both immediate and far-reaching negative consequences (Kieffer et al., 2014). Barber and Olsen (2004) remarked that middle school teachers are generally more demanding and connect to students on a less personal level, which is in direct conflict of the psychosocial needs of early adolescents. The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and

Drug Free Schools (2008) described a decline in the grades of first year middle school students when compared to their final year of elementary school. Balfanz (2009) detailed a strong correlation between middle grades success and high school graduation. Despite this, Andrews (2011) recounted how state and federal policies have historically overlooked the middle grades.

As stated previously, there is no program in this district that explicitly addresses the middle grades transition. There is, however, a body of research describing effective strategies that address the issues that arise with the transition from grade five to grade six. For example, Akos and Galassi (2004) and Yoon et al. (2015) asserted the importance of collecting the input from all stakeholders in the creation of a transition plan. Akos (2002) described how student perceptions in fifth and sixth grade change during the year, and that these different perspectives are imperative to creating an effective transition plan. Andrews and Bishop (2012) expressed the importance of engaging families in this transition. The Association for Middle Level Education (2002) emphasized the importance of collaboration between teachers, counselors, and school administrators to provide assistance to students during this crucial transition. Successful exemplars from North Carolina, other regions in the United States, and international school systems are readily available as building blocks for a successful transition program (Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Balfanz, 2009; L'Esperance, Lenker, Bullock, Lockamy, & Mason, 2013).

Student Perspectives

It is important to note that while some generalities can be drawn from the research, there is no *typical* middle school student (Miller, McKissick, Ivy, & Moser, 2017). Adolescents do not all mature on the same set schedule and at any time in any given middle school classroom there will exist a heterogeneous groupings of students at differing stages of physical, psychosocial, cognitive, and emotional development (Arim et al., 2011; Brown & Knowles, 2007; Gilewski &

Nunn, 2016; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). Such extreme differences must be taken into account when drawing conclusions about student perspectives regarding the transition from elementary school to middle school.

When considering ways to support students in the transition from elementary school to middle school, it is essential that teachers, administrators, and district leaders to consider the feelings and perspectives of the students themselves (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Galton & Morrison, 2000; Koppang, 2004; Yoon et al., 2015). While similar motifs emerge among the stakeholders involved in the transition to the middle grades, there is often a disconnect between what teachers or parents assume are student concerns and what those concerns actually are (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992).

Duchesne, Ratelle, and Roy (2012) identify three primary stressors that students described when considering the transition to middle school: concerns with increased academic demands, worries about teachers, and unease about peer relationships. These are concerns broadly, yet commonly expressed by students moving from elementary school to the middle grades (Akos, 2002; Duchesne, Ratelle, Poitras, & Drouin, 2009; Zeedyk, Gallacher, Henderson, Hope, Husband, & Lindsay, 2003). Akos (2004) identified similar themes identified by students regarding the transition to middle school. These concerns included the social and academic aspects of the move to middle school, but also included organizational concerns such as following rules, not getting lost, or being able to successfully operate a locker (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Akos (2004) also noted that students were more concerned with organizational themes prior to the transition to middle school, while academic and social concerns were more prevalent after the transition to middle school. It was these three themes that were considered for the purposes of this study.

Academic Concerns

When queried, students reported a number of different aspects of the middle school transition that caused them some amount of apprehension (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Bellmore, 2011; San Antonio, Marcell, Tieken, & Wiener, 2011; Wigfield, Eccles, Fredricks, Simpkins, Roeser, & Schiefele, 2015). Researchers have also found that student concerns varied from organizational, to social, to academic dependent upon whether the student was preparing for the transition to middle school or had already transitioned (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, & Splittgerber, 2000). As stated previously, Akos (2002) described how students were preoccupied with organizational issues such as getting lost or not being able to open their locker prior to transitioning to middle school, but then changed focus to the academic and social aspects of middle school after the transition.

Akos and Galassi (2004) reported that, regardless of transition stage, students consistently described some level of concern for the increase in academic expectations in the middle grades. In particular, students identified the amount of homework the envisioned they would be assigned as a key contributor to transition stress (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Anderson et al. (2000) stated that many students felt unprepared for the difficulty level of their coursework and were very concerned about earning lower grades than they were accustomed to, or even failing. Students reported distress about changes in expectations that put a greater emphasis on ability and competition with others rather than skills improvement or mastery (Alspaugh, 1998; Anderson et al., 2000; Ryan et al., 2013). Still other students were worried that they would have to answer questions orally more frequently and students would make fun of them for not knowing answers (San Antonio et al., 2011).

During adolescence, students begin to desire greater autonomy, but middle grades

teachers are actually less likely to utilize strategies that provide opportunities for autonomy (Goldstein et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2013; San Antonio et al., 2011; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, and Mac Iver (1993) maintained the need for classroom pedagogy to match the needs of students, which was referred to as a "stage-environment fit." Eccles et al. (1993) forwarded the idea that considering stage-environment fit could have a significant positive impact on student achievement, self-concept, and motivation. At this stage in their development, the students' need for autonomy includes having a voice in making decisions about academic tasks, including student-directed projects and classroom discussions (Beland, 2014; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Providing this autonomy to students and allowing them to be a part of the decision-making process regarding academic tasks leads students to become more engaged with their learning as they then view assignments have having more relevance or simply to be more interesting (Beland, 2014; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Unfortunately, at a time when students desire and need more autonomy, they are less likely to receive it, adding to transition stress and hampering student achievement (Eccles et al., 1993).

Paradoxically, students reported that they were both excited and apprehensive about the anticipated increased demands of middle school (San Antonio et al., 2011). On one hand, students felt that higher expectations were part of maturing and they looked forward to the challenge of more difficult academic tasks and increased individual accountability and responsibility. Conversely, students worried that they did not have the prerequisite skills or abilities to succeed in the more demanding middle school environment (San Antonio et al., 2011). These conflicting viewpoints highlight the importance of an effective middle school transition program to enhance the probability of student success (Gilewski & Nunn, 2016).

Organizational Concerns

Prior to transitioning to middle school students identified the need for basic information to prepare them for middle school such as how to get to class on time, how to find their correct bus, how to open their lockers, and other practical matters (Bailey, Giles, & Rogers, 2015; San Antonio et al., 2011). Students described feeling like they were starting over; akin to going to back to kindergarten (Association for Middle Level Education, 2002). Research by Akos and Galassi (2004) found that students pronounced getting lost in a large and unfamiliar school as one of their primary concerns. While student fears over organizational matters waned after the transition as they became more familiar with procedures and expectations, it is these matters that were described as primary stressors for students prior to the transition to middle school (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Making certain students are prepared for a new and different school structure and environment can enhance positive outcomes for students and predicate successful transitional outcomes (Akos, 2004).

Students reported being intimidated by the thought of suddenly being thrust into a school where they are no longer the oldest, biggest, or the top of the school's social hierarchy (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Lorain, 2002; San Antonio et al., 2011). In particular, students reported concerns about bullying behaviors from older students are described fears of locker rooms and restrooms and what would happen if they found themselves in one of these areas with older students (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Lorain, 2002). Moreover, stories of bullies, frequent fights, and other violence, embellished by parents and siblings, only added to transition stress (Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Lorain, 2002). Despite the sensationalism of such behavior, however, there is a noteworthy increase in peer bullying in the middle grades and it is a significant concern for incoming

students (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Farmer, Hamm, Leung, Lambert, & Gravelle, 2011, Pickhardt, 2011).

Once students transitioned to the middle school, there is often a sudden and perhaps unrealistic expectation from school personnel that the children have entered a new, more mature phase and that they should behave in a more consistently adult manner, despite the wide range of student development (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Lorain, 2002; Steinberg, 2015). As a result, students described new behavioral expectations as more restrictive and felt that school and classroom rules were more strictly enforced (Anderson et al., 2000). In their survey of rising sixth-graders, Bailey et al. (2015), discovered that eleven percent of the students involved of their study described "mean" or "strict" teachers as a middle school concern. This was not a choice provided on their survey, but was a frequent response in the write-in option in their data collection. Students were often unprepared for this sudden shift in expectations as students rising into high school, when asked to reflect on the transition to grade six, reported knowing and following the rules beforehand as an important aspect of success in middle school (Akos, 2002; 2004).

Eccles et al. (1993) declared the need for classroom pedagogy and procedures to match the needs of students, which they referred to as a "stage-environment fit." They forwarded the idea that considering stage-environment fit would have a significant positive impact on student achievement, self-concept, and motivation. During adolescence, students develop a desire for greater autonomy, but teachers are actually less likely to implement strategies that provide opportunities for autonomy such as shared decision-making and the creation of classroom behavioral expectations (Eccles et al., 1993; Goldstein et al., 2015; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). Eccles et al. (1993) suggested that this inconsistency between the

27

developmental stage of students and the more autocratic environment of the middle school could be detrimental to students' overall success in transitioning to the middle grades.

Following the progression to middle school students would greatly benefit from caring relationships with adults not associated with their families, but the structure of middle school creates challenges in fostering these relationships (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Goldstein et al., 2015; Mac Iver, 1990; Ryan et al., 2013; Vollet, Kinderman, & Skinner, 2017; Wigfield et al., 2015). Despite evidence supporting the importance of meaningful student-teacher relationships, once they transition to middle school, students reported a marked decline in the quality of the relationships they have with their teachers (Wigfield et al., 2015). These changes may be due in part to the organizational structure of the middle school. Instead of one or two classroom teachers, students may have as many as six to eight different teachers, making it challenging for both teacher and student to build meaningful relationships (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Mac Iver, 1990; Ryan et al., 2013; Vollet et al., 2017). This lack of closeness with teachers is often perceived by students as a decrease in teacher support (Schoffner & Williamson, 2000). This lack of perceived support is detrimental to student engagement and success as Wang and Holcombe (2010) found that students who reported feeling supported by teachers were more likely to meet behavioral and academic expectations.

Social Concerns

Many middle school transition plans often do not find success because they focus on academic and organizational concerns, but fail to address the social concerns of rising middle school students (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Koppang, 2004). In the position paper *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*, the Association for Middle Level Education (2002) stressed the importance of addressing the social needs of students rising into and

28

continuing through the middle grades. Students perceived a lessening of support from teachers, counselors, and administrators and greater engagement with their peers (Georgia Department of Education, 2015; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009). Students rising into and progressing through the middle grades have a strong desire to be part of a peer group in which they feel useful and valued (Bailey et al., 2015; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009). The nature of these peer relationships can be an insight into how successfully a student has navigated the transition into the middle grades (Bellmore, 2011; Danielsen, Wiium, Wihelmsen, & Wold, 2010; Demaray & Maleki, 2002; Johnson, Johnson, & Roseth, 2010; Kingery et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2013; Wentzel, 2003). As an indicator of the importance of these relationships, Akos (2002) and Akos and Galassi (2004) described how students believed that socializing with friends was a primary positive feature of the transition to middle school, but they also perceived that making new friends and how they were perceived by their new peers was of great concern.

Bellmore (2011) defined peer status as a measure of social functioning determined by one's overall peer group. The quality of the relationships that students foster in middle school, and therefore their peer status, is often an effective indicator of assimilation into the middle grades (Bellmore, 2011; Johnson et al., 2010). Bellmore (2011) asserted that creating and fostering positive peer relationships and establishing a high peer status is especially important to student success as they transition from elementary to middle school. Andrews and Bishop (2012) described that students claimed that not having a familiar peer support group or low peer status as a significant stressor when considering the transition to middle school. Support from classmates has been correlated with the successful adjustment to the middle school environment and increased feelings of academic competence and achievement (Danielsen et al., 2010; Demaray & Maleki, 2002; Ryan et al., 2013). Conversely, students with lower peer status or who

experienced peer rejection demonstrated decreases in scholastic functioning (Bellmore, 2011; Kingery et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2013; Wentzel, 2003). Unfortunately, this desire for increased peer status can cause students to engage in behaviors that attempt to establish social dominance in the school, leading to an increase in bullying behaviors (Farmer et al., 2011).

The social concerns of students extended beyond their relationships with their peers. Students also demonstrated significant apprehension about their relationships with teachers, administrators, and other school staff (Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Once they transitioned to middle school, students reported a marked decline in the quality of the relationships with their teachers (Georgia Department of Education, 2015; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Wigfield et al., 2015). This loss in the quality of student-teacher relationships is unfortunate as Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014) described how the relationship between teacher and student is often the greatest factor in determining students' connectivity to their school and school community. Akos and Galassi (2004) suggested that this connection to the school community can be an indicator of a successful middle school transition. Students reported a greater connection to their school community when teachers fostered a caring environment that supported their social needs (Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

Additional Student Perspectives

None of the three aspects of the middle school transition, academic, organizational, or social, operates in isolation. Bellmore (2011) described how students who experience unpopularity with their peers can experience more significant academic declines than their classmates who experience more positive peer relationships. Those students who have difficulty adhering to new behavioral expectations are more likely than their peers to experience academic difficulty and strained relationships with their peers (Theriot & Dupper, 2010). Wang and

30

Holcombe (2010) explained that each of these three aspects, individually or combined, can have a significant effect on student engagement.

Disparate demographic student groups also do not perceive the three aspects of the middle school transition equally (Akos et al., 2015; Bailey et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2013). Chung, Elias, and Schneider (1998) reported that female students described peer relationships as the most stressful aspect of the transition to middle school whereas male students found the most difficulty with increased academic demands. Students from lower socioeconomic classes expressed concerns that they would not be as prepared for middle school as their more affluent peers (San Antonio et al., 2011). Minority students reported concerns about possible stereotyping, differentiated expectations, and discrimination in everyday interactions (Bailey et al., 2015; Hill, Witherspoon, & Bartz, 2018; Ryan et al., 2013).

It is important to note that while the transition to middle school can be fraught with difficulties, many students do not experience the same challenges or declines that others experience during this transition (Akos, 2004; Akos & Galassi, 2004). Students described benefits such as increased freedom and making new friends as attractive features of transitioning to the middle grades (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Many students reported being excited about lockers and about the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities such as sports and non-curricular clubs (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Students also looked forward to additional freedoms such as not walking in lines having some control over their schedule by choosing their own elective courses (Akos, 2002; 2004).

There are many factors that may lead to a relatively seamless and successful transition to middle school. Madjar and Chohat (2016) proposed that those students who expect to have a positive transition are more likely to have positive experiences. Other research suggests that

students with parental support from their parents will have a more successful transition to middle

school (Daniel, 2011; Hoang, 2010; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack,

2007; U.S. Department of Education, Sustainability Series, 2009).

Parent Perspectives

Hill, Castellino, Lansford, Nowlin, Dodge, Bates, and Pettit (2004) defined parental

involvement as the partnership between parents and schools to the benefit of students'

educational outcomes and success in the future. For many middle grades students, grade six

represents their most challenging year and it is of the utmost importance that parents are

involved in every aspect of the transition to middle school (Allen, 2001; Anderson et al., 2000;

Georgia Department of Education, 2015; Mac Iver, 1990). Koppang (2004) characterized parent

involvement as critical to young adolescents making a successful transition to middle school.

Researchers have described two different forms of parental involvement with their child's

education; school-based involvement and home-based involvement (Pomerantz et al., 2007;

Toren, 2013). School-based involvement involves actual contact with the school such as

attending school events, teacher conferences, or regular communication with the school. Home-

based involvement relates to activities that take place outside of the school but are educationally-

related such as providing assistance with school work and course selection. Regardless of the

type of parental involvement, studies indicate that parental involvement in a child's education

has been shown to have positive impacts on academic performance, behavior, attendance, and

overall school climate (Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Daniel, 2011; Hoang , 2010; Hornby &

Lafaele, 2011; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Toren, 2013; U.S. Department of Education,

Sustainability Series, 2009).

Despite the clear links between overall student success and parental involvement,

significant gaps remain between productive parental involvement and the rhetoric from educators and parents' groups espousing its benefits (Hill et al., 2018; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Parents who are demonstrate limited parental school or home-based involvement are more likely to have children who partake in high-risk or antisocial behaviors and experience academic difficulties (Laird & Marrero, 2011). Further, Laird and Marrero provided that even if a parent was particularly active in their child's education, the child's mere perception of school or home-based parental involvement in their day-to-day activities was an accurate predictor of childhood behavior and academic success. More active school and home-based parental involvement and knowledge of an adolescents' activities has shown to be predictive of greater academic performance and fewer incidents of negative behaviors (Daniel, 2011; Hoang, 2010; Hill et al., 2018; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Laird, Pettit, Dodge, & Bates, 2003; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Toren, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, Sustainability Series, 2009).

Unfortunately, despite parents and schools having common goals, it is during adolescence that there is a precipitous drop in school and home-based parental involvement (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Crosnoe, 2001; Hill et al., 2018; Toren, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, 2008). A myriad of reasons have been proposed for such a decline. Crosnoe (2001) theorized that the adolescent desire for autonomy may lead to parents becoming less involved in education. Parents may be less inclined to exhibit home-based involvement because they do not feel comfortable with their comprehension of the curriculum (Crosnoe, 2001). Toren (2013) suggested that the complexity in structure and the sheer size of a middle school discourages parental school-based involvement. The trust between schools and families may erode as students advance into the middle grades further complicating parental involvement (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Parents have reported that they are unable

33

to create the same relationships they had with elementary school teachers, and teachers with greater numbers of students and responsibilities are not as responsive and the number of teachers a child is assigned does not provide the opportunity to build a primary source of support (Pickhardt, 2011; Ryan et al., 2013).

Akos and Galassi (2004) found that, like students, parents identified an increase the expected academic rigors, particularly the amount of homework that would be assigned to their children, as a potential stressor during the transition to middle school. In the same study, parents identified organizational concerns, such as their child getting lost, as a significant worry. However, Akos and Galassi described that parents, unlike their children, identified the social aspects of the transition to middle school as the most concerning. Their concerns may be detrimental to student success as some parents share cautionary tales of the difficulties students are about to face (Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Lorain, 2002). Once students made the actual transition to middle school, Akos and Galassi (2004) reported that parents reported new and unexpected responsibilities as the primary difficulty their children faced.

Parents also described several positive aspects of the transition to the middle school. They described that their children making new friends outside of their typical social circles and an increase in personal freedoms as benefits to moving to middle school (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Parents also looked forward to opportunities for their children to participate in activities not available at elementary school such as band or extracurricular sports (Akos & Galassi, 2004.)

Teacher Perspectives

Teachers have an essential role in students' transition from elementary to middle school (Akos & Galassi, 2004). It is critical that they are well-informed about the potential pitfalls for adolescents entering the middle grades and that they are able to supply the necessary supports for

the academic, social, and organizational challenges that their students face (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Beland, 2014; Koppang, 2004; Lorain, 2002; Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.; Steinberg, 2015).

Teachers seem to have a different outlook than their students regarding the transition to middle school, and researchers have noted little correlation between student and teacher perceptions of this transition (Akos, 2004; Akos & Galassi, 2004). Teachers believed that their students were more likely to identify social and organizational concerns as their primary apprehensions about moving to the middle grades, and they did not identify academic concerns as a priority for students (Akos, 2004; Akos & Galassi, 2004).

Despite the influence of the middle school movement and brain development research, educators generally did not seem well versed in adolescent development, which led to increased transition stress for students (Andrews & Bishop, 2012). Teachers were often surprised by the inconsistency in students' behaviors during the middle school years (Steinberg, 2011, 2015). Understanding the nature of brain development in adolescence helps explain why adolescents can fluctuate between mature and immature behaviors (McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). This lack of understanding also leads to gaps in pedagogical stage-environment fit as teachers in middle school generally assigned work that required a lower level of cognitive skills than students were required to demonstrate in elementary school, which is contradictory to the needs of adolescents (Beland, 2014; Eccels et al., 1993; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Simmons, Burgerson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987; Wang & Holcomb, 2010).

While acutely aware of the importance of the relationship between the school and home, Hill et al. (2018) described how middle grades teachers stated that they often found it difficult to foster meaningful relationships with students' parents and reported a loss of school-based

parental involvement. Teachers have many more students assigned to them compared to their elementary school counterparts (Toren, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, 2008). Teachers reported that having such large numbers of students makes communicating effectively with parents less effective and less frequent than they would like (Hill et al., 2018; Pickhardt, 2011). Additionally, teachers were often dubious of the value that parents placed on their child's education and home-based parental involvement (Hill et al., 2018). This perception led to a lack of trust between the teacher and parent, further complicating this vital relationship (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Highlighting the need for stronger relationships and communication between the school and home, teachers admitted that they often formed their opinions with little knowledge of parent perspectives on education (Hill et al., 2018).

Model Transition Activities

Creating programs to assist students with the transition to middle school is essential as a negative experience during the transition to middle school can have far-reaching effects on future student achievement (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Balfanz, 2009; Kieffer et al., 2014; Rice, Fredrickson, & Seymour, 2011; Tilleczek et al., 2007). Effective and comprehensive transition programs should provide benefits to students, parents, and teachers (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Hill & Mobley, 2016; Lorain, 2002). Fortunately, the literature provides a plethora of strategies and exemplars for districts that wish to create an effective, research-based middle grades transition program.

It should be recognized that there are commercially available middle grades transition programs available for purchase. Those programs, however, will not be considered for the

purpose of this Problem of Practice dissertation. While not discrediting or discounting the efficacy of any such program, this study will focus on using the body of available research and the input of district stakeholders to create the framework of an effective, comprehensive transition plan for students moving from the elementary to middle grades specific to the expressed needs of stakeholders in this district.

In some cases, state public education departments provide guidance pertaining to the transition to the middle grades. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction provides educators with a list of strategies to consider when planning middle grades transition programs for their school or district (Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.). This list contains suggestions of activities for students and their families to implement prior to, during, and after the transition to middle school (Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.). The California Department of Education (n.d.) has a website devoted to the middle grades transition. This web site provides a wealth of resources and strategies for educators to address the middle grades transition, beginning in the fifth grade, but the intended audience of this resource is primarily educators (California Department of Education, n.d.). The Kentucky Department of Education takes this a step further and provides educators with a list of pre- and post-transition activities and includes detailed descriptions of those activities (Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.). This document also provides information for families and contains hyperlinks to a variety of secondary resources (Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.).

One of the more comprehensive middle school programs is published by the Georgia Department of Education (2015). This transition plan contains a wealth of resources, including detailed descriptions of activities for parents, educational materials for both teachers and parents, and it also provides materials directed at students on topics such as adolescent growth and

development and middle school expectations and preparation and is presented in a developmentally appropriate format (Georgia Department of Education, 2015).

Preparing students for the transition to middle school needs to begin while students are still in the fifth grade (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Bailey et al., 2015). Part of this preparation is creation of transition teams at the elementary and middle school levels (Anderson et al., 2000; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Fields, 2002; Hill & Mobley, 2016). These transition teams should consist of administrators, counselors, and teachers from the elementary and middle school that meet regularly to share information about students who will be transitioning to the middle grades (Anderson et al., 2000; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Fields, 2002; Hill & Mobley, 2016). These teams should discuss the academic, social and organizational needs of rising sixth grade students (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Fields, 2002; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016). Transition teams should collaborate to devise strategies for providing appropriate supports to those students deemed at-risk (Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Wormeli, 2011). Students who are identified as academically or socially at-risk typically lack the skills to navigate their new learning environment, compounding previously existing problems, resulting in disengagement with the school community (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Balfanz, 2009; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). Wormeli (2011) forwarded the idea that transition teams consider the needs of all students, not just those at risk and suggested the creation of instructional enhancements for those students identified as accelerated learners.

The literature identified orientation programs as effective transition activities (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Bailey et al., 2015; Cauley &

Jovanovich, 2006; Fields, 2002; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Hill & Mobley, 2016; Wormeli, 2011).

Orientation program activities that begin in the fifth grade include visits from sixth grade

students to describe their middle school experiences (Bailey et al., 2015; Fields, 2002; McElroy,

2000). Gilweski, and Nunn (2016) recommended that select members of fifth grade classrooms

spend a day shadowing a sixth-grade student at the middle school and then report their

observations back to their classmates.

A common transition strategy often cited in the literature was a school tour (Akos &

Galassi, 2004; Bailey et al., 2015; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Fields, 2002; Gilweski & Nunn,

2016; Hill & Mobley, 2016; McElroy, 2000; Wormeli, 2011). It was suggested that these tours

be led by eighth-grade student "ambassadors" that could answer questions posed by rising

middle school students (Bailey et al., 2015; Fields, 2002; McElroy, 2000). Fields (2002)

suggested that the tour should familiarize students with the physical layout of the building, but

also introduce procedures and expectations by allowing the visiting students to eat lunch in the

school cafeteria.

Summer orientation programs, such as picnics or other informal social gatherings with

students, their families, teachers, and school administrators in attendance, were also suggested

for continued engagement in the transition process (Bailey et al., 2015; Fields, 2002; Wormeli,

2011). Parents and students were included in these events and allowed them to become more

familiar with school and classroom procedures and expectations without the added pressures of a

typical school day (Bailey et al., 2015; Fields, 2002; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Wormeli, 2011).

As the beginning of the school year approaches, Gilweski and Nunn (2016) and Wormeli

(2011) recommended that sixth grade students begin a half-day earlier the other students in the

school in order to get acclimated with new environment and to meet with school leadership

39

teams to address any lingering questions or concerns. Once the school year starts, several researchers suggested that easily recognizable student ambassadors should be posted around the school to assist new students during class changes (Fields, 2002; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Wormeli, 2011).

It is important that parents are well-informed, active partners in all facets of the middle school transition (Allen, 2001; Koppang, 2004). Wormelli (2011) described a program that begins this relationship with letter home from the middle school principal on last day of elementary school that includes an invitation to summer orientation programs. Wormeil also suggested that sixth grade teachers attend elementary afterschool events where they can introduce themselves to the parents of their rising students. Outreach to parents should increase as students prepare to begin their middle school careers (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderson et al., 2000). The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1995) recommended starting parent-to-parent support groups sponsored by school. Such parent groups would allow parents to network become more informed about this critical juncture in the lives of their children including information on adolescent brain research, student perceptions on moving to the middle grades, school expectations and procedures, and strategies for parents to remain involved with the school community (Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Fields, 2002; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011; Wormeli, 2011).

Assistance in the transition can also come from outside of the immediate school community. McElroy (2000) maintained that adult mentors can be effective partners in providing additional supports for students who are academically or socially at-risk. Business partners could provide extrinsic incentives for students meeting academic improvement, behavior, attendance or

other predetermined criteria such as public recognition ceremonies (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; McElroy, 2000).

School and district leaders should establish a middle grades transition plan that includes a timeline and activities that can be replicated from year to year (Koppang, 2004). While these transition plans should be repeatable, they should remain malleable enough to be tailored to the needs of each group of students (Gilweski & Nunn, 2016). Transition plans should be publicized by the district on websites and other media that can be easily accessed by stakeholders (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Any transition program should include activities that continue as students progress through grade six, and not merely the period immediately before and after students move to the middle school (Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Hill & Mobley, 2016).

Summary

Given the availability of research and model programs and activities to follow, it is not clear why there is no middle grades transition plan in this district. The lack of a cohesive plan has been noted as a concern by school leaders in this district. There have been attempts to create some semblance of a plan, mostly consisting of school tours and counselor visits, but nothing that would directly address the academic, social, and organizational concerns and challenges described in the literature. This transition, one of the most critical of a student's life, can no longer go unaddressed in this district.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

Background

Students enrolled in this district exhibit an overall decline in standardized test scores when they transition from elementary school to middle school (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017a). There is ample evidence in the literature that indicates that, in general, this is not uncommon for students of this age group (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 1998; Balfanz, 2009; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995; Eccles et al., 2006; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; McGill et al., 2012; Schwerdt & West, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, 2008). From 2014 through 2017, students in this district who progressed from grade five to grade six demonstrated a 2.9% average increase in the number of those determined to be grade-level proficient in reading as compared to a 4.9% average increase statewide during the same period of time (see Table 1). From 2014 through 2017, the number of students in this district who progressed from grade five to grade six who were deemed to be grade-level proficient in mathematics decreased by an average of 12.3% as compared to a 6.9% decrease across North Carolina (see Table 1).

Student short-term suspension data also demonstrates dramatic changes between elementary and middle school. Data maintained by the district illustrated a marked increase in student short-term suspensions from grade five to grade six (see Table 2). From 2014 through 2017, there was an average of approximately 124 short-term suspensions per year issued to fifth grade students while the average number of short-term suspensions for sixth grade students increased to 251 issued per year (see Table 2). The average length of short-term suspensions also increased as fifth grade short term suspensions averaged 1.8 days in length, while sixth grade suspensions averaged 2.5 days in length (see Table 2).

An effective transition from elementary school to middle school is an important building block for long-term student success (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Andrews, 2011; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Balfanz, 2009; Kieffer et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2011; Tilleczek et al., 2007). It is, consequently, the lack of a clearly defined plan in this district for the transition from the elementary school to middle school which may be at least partly responsible for the disparities in state assessment and significant increases in student suspensions. While the district organizes minimal transition activities such as school visits and tours, any other activities are left to be developed and implemented by individual schools, with little in the way of district support. With no clearly shared vision or articulation between schools, students may be largely ill-prepared for the drastic changes in their educational experience as they transition to the middle grades. This lack of preparedness may lead to an increase in student discipline issues, and a decrease in student achievement as measured by state assessments.

Participants

The creation of this middle grades transition plan was the result of gathering input of all stakeholders and applying that information to the available body of research involving the middle school transition. Feedback from district stakeholders is an essential component of the formation of a middle grades transition plan (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Yoon et al., 2015). This feedback was sought from all district fifth-grade students and their caregivers, all district fifth and sixth-grade teachers, and a focus group of elementary and secondary school administrators.

Design of the Study

For this study, multiple data were collected and purposed to engage in an improvement science approach that would be most appropriate in obtaining stakeholder feedback and descriptive statistics. Improvement science is used to bring about change through the

combination of subject matter knowledge and profound knowledge (Langley, Moen, Nolan, Nolan, Norman, & Provost, 2009). Subject knowledge is that which professionals have acquired through learning and experience (Langley et al., 2009). Profound knowledge is described as "the interplay of theories of systems, variation, knowledge, and psychology" (Deming, as cited in Langley et al., 2009. p. 75). The application of improvement science can be integrated into the practice of Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) (Rohanna, 2017). While improvement science has been applied effectively in arenas such as the health care industry and in post-secondary education, it has yet to be widely adopted in the K-12 education setting (Rohanna, 2017). The PDSA approach to improvement science described by Rohanna, however, is a sensible methodology for this Problem of Practice.

During the "Plan" phase, a course of action is developed and the impact is predicted (Rohanna, 2017). The "Do" phase focuses on the gathering of data (Rohanna, 2017). Reflecting upon the results represents the "Study" phase (Rohanna, 2017). Finally, "Act" means to do just that; to act upon the determined results (Rohanna, 2017). In the case of this Problem of Practice, the student transition to middle school was identified as an area of needed improvement (plan), appropriate research was identified and the input of stakeholders was collected (do), a middle school transition plan was created using that information (study) and the resulting plan will be introduced to executive staff of the district for their consideration for district-wide implementation (act).

The strategies described by Andrews and Bishop (2012) and Akos (2002) were incorporated into the collection of stakeholder data. They described the integration of the thoughts and feelings of the affected stakeholders as crucial to the success of any transition

program. In considering descriptive statistics, student achievement data such as test scores and student discipline data supported the need for a comprehensive transition plan.

Student feedback was collected, in part, through a series of surveys and prioritized utilizing a modified Delphi Technique. The Delphi Technique allows data gathering from a group of stakeholders in order to identify a consensus (Sandford & Hsu, 2007). In addition to consensus building, Sandford and Hsu (2007) stated that the Delphi Technique can be used as a needs assessment, which was a primary goal of student survey data collection in this study. The Delphi Technique typically begins with an open-ended questionnaire (Sandford & Hsu, 2007). For the purposes of this Problem of Practice, the Delphi technique was modified by providing a defined structure for initial student responses which would then serve as a foundation for additional iterations of surveys used for data collection (Sandford & Hsu, 2007). Student and parent feedback was collected in several phases as described by Akos (2002) while teacher data was collected via a single survey and administrator feedback was obtained through a focus group interview. This data, in conjunction with available research in the literature was compiled and used to create a comprehensive elementary to middle grades transition plan.

<div align="center">

Data Collection Procedures

</div>

Data Collection Methods

Permission to conduct this study was originally granted by the district on September 27, 2016. Permission to begin data collection was obtained from the East Carolina University's Institutional Review Board on March 7, 2017. All district fifth-grade teachers were provided with a sufficient number of student participation permission forms so that all district fifth-grade students and their parents were provided information and an opportunity to participate in this study.

The Qualtrics software program was used to design all surveys. Qualtrics was used to generate anonymous URL links that were emailed to teachers to distribute to students and parents, and allowed teachers to access the educator-specific survey. This method was used so that surveys could be completed anonymously and any individual responses were held in confidence. The Qualtrics program was used to securely house and analyze all stakeholder survey responses.

Data collection was divided into four separate phases. Phase One of the data collection process provided fifth-grade students and their parents with similar twenty-item Likert-style questionnaires. The questions were categorized into four themes. On the student survey, those themes were academic engagement, student and teacher relationships, school engagement, and self-perception. These themes were not identified for students or parents on their respective surveys.

The first five prompts of the student survey focused on academic engagement. These prompts presented students with statements that directly addressed academic issues such as the importance of grades and how difficult it is for them to complete their homework. The next five prompts on the survey addressed student and teacher relationships. These statements were intended to gauge student beliefs about the nature of the interactions they had with their teachers, such as if they felt liked or valued by their teachers, or if they believed they could trust their teachers to assist with problems beyond academics. The five following prompts fell into the category of school engagement. The purpose of these prompts was to determine student perceptions of their school by presenting prompts about topics such as school recommendations or the fairness of school rules. The final five prompts were grouped statements about self-perceptions. Prompts in this theme were designed to gather information on student beliefs about

46

themselves by inquiring about relationships with peers and student impressions of their academic acumen.

For the parent survey prompts were themed as academic engagement, parent-school relationship, school engagement, and student self-perception. The first five prompts on the parent survey focused on academic engagement. The statements in this theme were similar in nature to those on the student survey, but posed those inquiries in terms of parent perceptions of student academic engagement such as asking parents if they felt that their child has difficulty completing homework or if their child feels challenged at school. The next five prompts on the parent survey addressed parent and school relationships. These prompts were designed to identify school-based parental involvement such as communication between the school and home and opportunities for parents to be active in the school. The next group of five prompts focused on school engagement. These prompts were similar to the student survey questions regarding school engagement, such as school recommendations and the fairness of school rules. The final five prompts were themed as student self-perceptions. These prompts were comparable to the student survey regarding self-perceptions but were designed to collect information on parent beliefs regarding student feelings. This was accomplished by presenting them with prompts such as inquiring about how their child felt about their peer relationships or if parents believed their child felt valued at school.

In addition to the Likert-style questionnaire, Phase One of data collection also asked students and parents to describe no more than ten concerns they had about the transition to middle school and ten benefits they envisioned when considering the transition to middle school. Student and parent responses to the concerns and benefits sections of the survey were coded and categorized based on common themes.

Phase Two of data collection was provided to students only. In Phase Two, the ten most commonly listed themes identified by students as concerns and the eight most commonly listed themes identified by students as benefits during Phase One were provided to students. They were asked to rank each of the items from most concerning or beneficial to least concerning or beneficial.

Phase Three of the data collection process involved the final student survey regarding the concerns and benefits they perceived as they prepared to move to the middle grades. Using the Delphi Technique, the lower ranked responses from Phase Two were eliminated from the student survey to provide them with five choices in each category. Students were presented with the five highest ranked concerns and benefits from Phase Two. Students were asked to rank each of the items from most concerning or beneficial to least concerning or beneficial.

Phase Three also involved obtaining feedback from grade five and grade six teachers. All fifth and sixth-grade teachers employed by the district were presented with the five highest ranked concerns and benefits about the middle grades transition and asked to rank those concerns from highest to lowest as they perceived that their students would. Teachers were also presented with several open-ended questions about district and school level support for the transition to middle school. Fifth grade teachers were presented with five open-ended questions while sixth grade teachers had an additional question about incoming sixth grade students.

At the beginning of the school year, and prior to the final phase of data collection, the administrators of two district middle schools agreed to implement three transition strategies that were developed through analysis of best practices available in the body of research. This was intended to serve as a small-scale proof-of-concept; that the developed strategies would have some effect on student adjustment after they transitioned to the middle school.

Phase Four of data collection was the final stakeholder data collection stage. Students who had transitioned into the sixth grade were provided with the same twenty item questionnaire that they were administered at the beginning of Phase One. Parents who had agreed to participate in this study were also given the opportunity to answer the same twenty item questionnaire from Phase One. During the Phase Four data collection period, a school administrator focus group was assembled and interviewed. The administrator focus group consisted of three elementary school principals and three middle school principals.

Data Collection Processes

All fifth-grade teachers in the district were asked to distribute student permission forms that would indicate that all children participating in the survey had obtained their parent's permission to do so. The permission forms also provided parents with the opportunity to participate in the study. These forms were distributed to teachers via intradistrict mail courier on March 14, 2017 (see Appendix A). The consent forms were accompanied by a cover letter explaining the purpose of the consent forms and included a request that any signed consent forms be returned via intradistrict mail courier by March 20, 2017 (see Appendix B). Once returned, a spreadsheet was created listing those students who were granted permission to participate along with any parent emails if they also expressed a desire to participate in the study.

To initiate Phase One of data collection, an email was sent to teachers on April 2, 2017. This email contained a list of students in their homeroom class who had received permission to participate in the study. The email also provided a URL link for the teachers to distribute to those students that would allow them to access the survey (see Appendix C). All fifth-grade students in this district have school-issued laptops, and teachers were asked to provide students a few moments during the week of April 3, 2017 to use their computers to complete the survey. Prior

49

to allowing students to complete the survey, teachers were asked to read a set of instructions and to provide students another opportunity to decline to participate in the study (see Appendix D). All of those students who still wished to participate in the study were then permitted to access the survey (see Appendix E). The parent survey was also distributed via email on April 4, 2017. This email included a request for parents to volunteer to participate in a focus group to be interviewed about the middle grades transition (see Appendix F). As with the student survey, a URL link was included in the body of the email that allowed parents to access the survey (see Appendix G).

Once the Phase One survey period was completed, open-ended student responses involving their concerns or perceived benefits regarding the transition to middle school were compiled into common themes. The ten most commonly recurring themes in the concerns category and eight in the benefits category were used to create the Phase Two survey. This survey was sent to teachers using the same process described for Phase One on May 14, 2017 with the request that the survey be completed no later than May 19, 2017 (see Appendix H). The survey asked students to rank the choices in each category from most concerning or beneficial to least concerning or beneficial. The survey was designed so that students could simply drag and drop their choices into the order they desired (see Appendix I).

The five concerns and benefits ranked the highest by students on the Phase Two survey were used to create the Phase Three student survey. The Phase Three survey was distributed to students using the same processes described in Phases One and Two. The survey was sent to teachers via email on May 28, 2017 with a desired completion date of June 2, 2017 (see Appendix J). The Phase Three student survey asked students to rank the five choices in each of

the concerns or benefits categories using the same drag and drop method used in the Phase Two survey (see Appendix K).

Teacher surveys were also distributed during Phase Three. Prior to receiving the survey, fifth and sixth grade teachers were provided with an information letter distributed via email on June 1, 2017. The informational letter was intended to provide teachers with the purpose of the study and to assure them in advance that their participation was voluntary (see Appendix L). This survey was distributed to teachers via an email June 6, 2017, with a request that the survey be completed by June 12, 2017 (see Appendix M). This survey contained the same list of five concerns and benefits students described about the middle school transition and teachers were asked to rank them according to how they believed the students would rank them. The teacher survey also included several open-ended questions about how they perceived school and district-level support for the middle school transition. The fifth-grade teacher survey posed five open-ended questions about the middle grades transition (see Appendix N). The sixth-grade teacher survey had an additional question about student preparedness (see Appendix O).

Prior to Phase Four of the data collection process, three transition strategies that were devised based on evidence from the literature were implemented at two district middle schools. These strategies were put in place as a small-scale proof of concept of the efficacy of transition strategies. One such strategy was to provide literature to parents and students about expectations regarding academic, social, and physical changes that students could expect during early adolescence. The student version of the literature also provided tips for students to become involved in their school while the family version of this information presented parents with suggestions for ways to get engaged with their child's school. The literature that was provided to

51

students and parents is available for public use through the Georgia Department of Education (2015).

Student ambassadors were another of the small-scale proof of concept strategies attempted at the two participating schools. Both principals were very enthusiastic about this strategy. The principals selected appropriate grade eight students to serve as student ambassadors. Students were selected based on their academic and social acumen and the principal's perception of their skills as student leaders. Students wore large greeting stickers on their shirts with the words "Ask Me" written on them. The student ambassadors were posted throughout the school during class changes and sixth-grade students were encouraged to direct any questions about room locations or other organizational concerns to the student ambassadors.

The final strategy employed as a small-scale proof of concept was an informational meeting held in conjunction with each school's Open House events. The meeting was structured to provide parents and students with basic information about their respective school. Topics discussed included school arrival expectations, cafeteria procedures for breakfast and lunch, rules for changing classes, and other organizational issues.

Phase Four of data collection began on October 8, 2017. District records were used to determine the teachers of those students who had permission to participate in the survey during their fifth-grade year. The survey was distributed to sixth-grade teachers via email with a list of students who had permission to participate. The email was sent on October 8, 2017 with the request that students be allowed to respond to the survey no later than October 13, 2017 (see Appendix P). The body of the email contained a URL to allow access to the student survey which was identical to the Likert-scale survey from Phase One. This survey was administered to determine any changes in student perceptions after the transition to middle school. Parents were

sent the Phase Four information about the Phase Four survey via email on October 11, 2017 with the request that they complete the survey at their earliest convenience (see Appendix Q). The body of the email included a hyperlink that allowed parents to access the survey which was identical to the survey they received during Phase One of data collection. This survey was administered to identify any changes in parent perceptions after their children had transitioned to middle school.

The final segment of Phase Four of the date collection process was an interview with a school administrator focus group. The focus group consisted of three elementary school principals three middle school principals and was conducted on October 25, 2017. This interview was conducted in a semi-structured format with ten predetermined questions allowing for follow-up based on the responses from the focus group participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Demographics

Permission to participate in this study was originally sought for all fifth-grade students registered in 18 elementary schools across the district during the 2016-2017 school year. To obtain permission, 1,963 consent forms were provided to students. Each of these forms also requested parent participation in the study. Of these, 437 parents provided permission for their child to take part in the study and 181 parents agreed to participate.

Phase One of the study saw 280 students access and complete the survey. Additionally, during Phase One, 55 parent surveys were completed and five parents agreed to be interviewed as part of a parent focus group. Without knowledge of which students had or had not completed the survey during Phase One, each of the 437 students who had originally be scheduled to participate received a link to the Phase Two survey. The Phase Two survey saw student participation increase to 290 students.

The next phase of data collection witnessed a drastic drop in student participation as only 131 students responded to the Phase Three survey. Teacher response during Phase Three was also limited. Phase Three surveys were sent to 83 fifth-grade teachers and 71 sixth-grade teachers, which represented all of the classroom teachers employed by the district at those grade levels who were assigned a homeroom class. Of those, 21 fifth-grade teachers and ten sixth-grade teachers provided survey data.

During Phase Four of data collection, despite 45 original student participants transferring out of district, participation increased from Phase Three to 207 students. The level of participation at the seven district middle schools displayed a great degree of variance. One middle school had as many as 63 students participate, while another had as few as twelve. The two middle schools that agreed to the small-scale proof of concept had low participation levels, with one supplying 17 responses and the other slightly higher at 27 responses. There was limited parent response during Phase Four with only 35 parents providing data through the survey. The parent focus group did not materialize as one parent no longer wished to participate, one did not respond to repeated attempts at communication, and three transferred from the district between their child's fifth and sixth grade years.

Limitations

This study attempted to integrate the feedback of all stakeholders affected by the transition from grade five to grade six. There was, however, limited participation from students, parents, and teachers. While 1,963 students had the opportunity to participate, only 22.3% of students received consent from their parents to take part in this study. There was also a considerable discrepancy in actual participation. Phase Two had the highest rate of student participation with 14.8% of grade five students responding while Phase Three saw participation

drop to 6.7% of fifth-grade students. When consent was sought, 9.2% of district parents agreed to provide feedback for this study. During Phase One of data collection, 2.8% of district parents responded to the survey and in Phase Four that number dwindled to 1.8%. Grade five teachers displayed the greatest participation percentage among educators as 31% of that group provided feedback, while 14% of grade six teachers responded to the survey. This limited level of participation raises the possibility that the feedback collected was not necessarily indicative of a majority of stakeholders in the district.

Apart from the school administrator focus group, data collection was entirely anonymous. While it was hoped that this anonymity would encourage participation, it also created a limitation in the assurance of consistency in the collection of data. Because participants were not asked to provide any identifying information, there was no way to track which students and which parents supplied data during the data collection process.

In order to remain bounded, the study did not consider the idiosyncrasies of different demographic groups. The study was intended to provide the insight of district students transitioning to middle school as a single demographic. The study did not differentiate between gender, race, socio-economic status, or special needs. Students within these subgroups may view the transition quite differently than the overall student population (Akos et al., 2015; Bailey et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2013).

Ethical Protections

All stakeholders were informed that their participation was completely voluntary. Students were assured that all surveys were completely anonymous and that their responses would have no effect on their grades. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the course of this study. Student, parent, and teacher feedback was collected anonymously. The district in

which this study took place was not identified, nor were the names of any individual schools or administrators. All confidential data was maintained on secure, password-protected computer hardware and software programs.

Summary

Chapter Three described the elements of the research design that was incorporated into this study. It provided a brief description of the district and the surrounding community. The rationale behind the framework of the study and how that framework was employed to create a format for data collection. A description of how that data was collect was included. Limitations affecting the study as well as ethical considerations were considered.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This Problem of Practice study was undertaken to create a comprehensive elementary to middle school transition plan. Stakeholder input, combined with research in the available body of literature was combined to create elements within that plan. The overarching theory of this approach was that the creation of a properly designed comprehensive transition plan with collaboratively focused activities for rising sixth graders based on stakeholder needs will increase academic performance, reduce undesired behaviors, decrease transition stress, and foster positive student engagement.

District Level Assessment Data

All district-level assessment data was collected through a publicly available reporting hub accessed through the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction web site (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017a). Data was considered for the fifth-grade cohorts from the 2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017 school years. For this study, North Carolina End of Grade tests were used to determine student proficiency. The North Carolina End of Grade test is a state-wide multiple-choice assessment aligned with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2017b). This assessment is administered to most North Carolina public school students in grades three through eight with exceptions for students with significant cognitive delays and some English language learners (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2017b). At the end of each academic year, students in grades three through eight who are eligible to participate in this assessment are tested in reading and mathematics and students in grades five and eight are additionally assessed in science (Public Schools of North

Carolina, 2017b). Students were determined to be grade-level proficient if they met minimum proficiency standards established by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

District Level Discipline Data

For this Problem of Practice study, discipline data was obtained via reports maintained locally and made available through PowerSchool, which is the district's student information system. School administrators in this district have a variety of consequences at their disposal to address disciplinary infractions. In the bounds of this study, however, only short-term out-of-school suspensions were considered. North Carolina General Statute §115C-390.1 (2013) defines a short-term suspension as the exclusion from school for disciplinary purposes for a period of up to ten days. In-school suspension data was not utilized for this study as not all elementary schools in this district use that strategy as a disciplinary consequence, but all middle schools in the district have a staff-member dedicated specifically to manage in-school suspensions. Suspensions longer than ten days were also not considered as the district does not support this as a disciplinary consequence suitable for students in the elementary grades.

Suspensions were divided into either subjective or objective behavioral codes. Subjective suspensions were those that required some level of opinion or judgement on the part of the teacher or administrator such as "insubordination" or "aggressive behavior". Objective suspensions were those behaviors that were referred for a specific event or action such as "fighting" or "possession of a weapon". Suspensions were divided into these categories to ascertain if students were more or less likely to be referred for subjective offenses depending on grade level or were more or less likely to engage in a specific behavior based upon grade level.

Phase One of Data Collection

Phase One of data collection consisted of two elements. One component was the collection of initial student data and the second was the collection of parent data. To obtain parent permission for student participation in the survey, all fifth-grade teachers in the district were asked to distribute student consent forms that described the purpose of the study, how the study would be conducted, asked for parent consent for their child to participate in the study, and explained ethical protections. The permission forms also provided an opportunity for parents to participate in the study. These forms were distributed to teachers through the district's interoffice courier on March 14, 2017. An email was sent on that explained the purpose behind the letters they would be receiving, asked the teachers for their support in collecting these forms, and requested that teachers return the forms via interoffice mail by March 20, 2017. Once the due date had passed, a spreadsheet was created listing those students whose parents consented to their participation in the study and recorded parent email addresses if they also assented to participate in the study.

Phase One of data collection began on April 2, 2017. On that date, teachers with participating students were sent an email that contained a list of students in their homeroom class who had received their parent's consent to participate in the study. Included in this email was a URL link to the survey that teachers provided to the students that allowed them to access the study. Teachers were asked to provide students a few moments during the week of April 3, 2017 to use their school-issued laptops to respond to the survey.

The parent survey was also distributed through email. The survey was accessed through a URL link embedded in the email along with a request for their participation in a focus group.

That email was distributed to parents on April 4, 2017 with the request that it be completed at their convenience.

Once the Phase One response collection period expired, open-ended student and parent responses were coded and grouped by common themes. This collection and coding of open-ended responses was the initial step in the modified Delphi technique employed to find student consensus in this study. The ten recurring themes in the concerns category and eight in the benefits category were identified and prepared for distribution to students in Phase Two of the data collection process. Coding was accomplished through the utilization of descriptive statistics, using verbatim statements and common vocabulary within responses. This limited the need to attempt to infer meaning in student responses. Parent responses were coded and recorded for consideration for the creation of a transition plan. Student and parent responses to the Likert-scale questionnaire were cataloged for comparisons with Phase Four responses.

<div align="center">

Phase Two of Data Collection

</div>

Phase Two of data collection represented the second step in building student consensus by applying the modified Delphi technique to student-supplied data. Student responses to the open-ended section of the Phase One survey were coded and categorized by common themes. The ten most commonly recurring themes in the concerns category and the eight most common in the benefits category were used to create the Phase Two survey. While the original intent was to have ten choices in each category, only eight benefits categories could be identified from student responses.

Phase Two of the data collection process began on May 14, 2017. Teachers with participating students were sent an email on that date that contained a list of students in their homeroom class who had received their parent's consent to participate in the study. The email

included a URL link to the survey that teachers were asked to provide to the students so they could complete the survey. Teachers were asked to allow students a few moments during the week of May 15, 2017 to respond to the survey with completion no later than May 19, 2017.

The survey asked students to rank the choices in each category from what they believed to be most concerning or most beneficial to least concerning or least beneficial when considering the transition to middle school. The students were able to order their choices by a drag and drop method. The results were recorded and stored electronically in preparation for Phase Three of the data collection process.

Phase Three of Data Collection

Phase Three of data collection was the final stage in the student consensus building process using the modified Delphi technique. In preparation for this phase of data collection, the Phase Two survey results were examined and the lowest-ranked student selections from the concerns category and the benefits category were eliminated leaving only the five highest ranked themes in each. The remaining five choices in each category were used to assemble the Phase Three survey.

On May 28, 2017, grade five teachers who had participating students in their homeroom were sent an email that contained a list of students in their homeroom class who were participating in the study. The email also included a URL link to the survey that teachers were asked to provide to the students so they could complete the survey. Teachers were asked to allow students time during the week of May 28, 2017 to complete the survey.

The Phase Three student survey required students to rank each of the five selections in the concerns category and the benefits category from in order from most concerning or beneficial

to least concerning or beneficial using the same drag and drop method that was employed on the Phase Two survey.

Surveys were also distributed to grade five and grade six teachers in the district during Phase Three of data collection. The survey was distributed to teachers via email on June 6, 2017 with a request that they complete the survey by June 12, 2017. The email contained a URL that directed teachers to the survey to complete. This survey contained a list of the five concerns and five benefits that students had identified during Phase One and Phase Two of data collection. Teachers were asked to rank them from most concerning or most beneficial to least concerning or least beneficial according to how they believed that the students would rank them. The teacher survey also included several open-ended questions about how they perceived school and district-level support for the middle school transition. The sixth-grade teacher survey had an additional question about student preparedness that was not included on the grade five survey.

Phase Four of Data Collection

Phase Four of data collection was initiated on October 8, 2017. Each of the district's eight middle schools received students from three to six of district's twenty elementary schools. District records contained within the PowerSchool program were used determine to which of the middle schools the students participating in this study were assigned. Those sixth-grade teachers who had participating students in their homeroom were sent an email on October 8, 2017. This email contained a brief explanation of the study, a list of those students in their homeroom whose parents had provided consent for them to participate, and a URL link that would provide students access to the final survey. The email asked that students be provide time to complete the survey no later than October 13, 2017.

Parents who had originally agreed to take part in this study were also asked to complete a survey during Phase Four of data collection. On October 11, 2017 participating parents were sent an email that contained a URL that provided them access to the survey. Parents were asked to respond to the survey at their convenience.

The survey that was distributed to students and parents during Phase Four of data collection was identical to the Likert-scale survey they were asked to complete during Phase One of data collection. The purpose of repeating the survey was to determine if there had been any perceptions in the four themes encompassed in the twenty Likert-scale questions on the survey.

Phase Four of data collection concluded with a school administrator focus group conducted on Oct. 25, 2017. The focus group consisted of three district elementary school principals and three district middle school principals, each with a minimum of two years' experience at their current school. The focus group interview was conducted at the district's central office. The focus group was designed using a semi-structured interview protocol allowing for additional questions based on answers to predetermined questions posed by the interviewer (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Summary of Findings

District Level Assessment Data Findings

From 2014 to 2017, students in this district established an average 2.9% increase in the number of those students progressing from grade five to grade six who demonstrated grade-level proficiency in reading. During this same period, there was an average 4.9% increase in the percentage of students transitioning from grade five to grade six determined to be grade-level proficient in reading statewide (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017a). During the school years spanning from 2014 to 2017, the district averaged a 12.3% drop in the

number of students considered grade-level proficient in mathematics after transitioning to middle school compared with statewide 6.9% average decrease in the number of students who were determined to be grade level proficient during the same school years (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017a) (see Table 1).

Average grade-level proficiencies for district students in both reading and math were skewed by outliers in the three-year data sets. In the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years, the students of this district who transitioned to the middle grades demonstrated increases in reading proficiency, but that growth lagged behind statewide measures. Results of assessments at the conclusion of the 2016-2017 school year illustrated an increase the percentage of district students who had transitioned to the middle grades and were deemed reading proficient increased dramatically and surpassed state proficiency increases.

In mathematics, a dramatic decline in the percentage of district students who had progressed from grade five to grade six and were deemed to be grade-level proficient was noted during the 2014-2015 school year. While declines in the percent of district students who progressed to the middle grades measured as grade-level proficient were noted in subsequent school years, those declines were not as pronounced as in the 2014-2015 school year when there was a 17.1% decrease in the number of students who transitioned to middle school and were determined to be proficient in mathematics. The state average of students deemed proficient also exhibited declines between grades five and six, they were not as steep as those measured within the district, with a state-wide average decrease of 6.9% (see Table 1).

District Level Discipline Data Findings

Students in this district who had transitioned to grade six were, on average, approximately twice as likely to be issued a short-term suspension, as the consequence for a

behavior, than they were while still attending elementary school. From 2014-2016, fifth grade students averaged 124.3 short-term suspensions issued per year. After those students transitioned to middle school, the average number of short-term suspensions assigned increased to 251 annually. The average length of short-term suspensions for middle grades students was 0.7 days longer than those assigned in elementary school. The average length of a short-term suspension issued to grade five students from 2014-2016 was 1.8 school days. Once those students progressed to middle school, the average length of a short-term suspension increased to 2.5 school days (see Table 2).

The 2014 grade five cohort demonstrated significant increases in several subjective behaviors. During grade five, school personnel recorded 27 instances of subjectively aggressive behaviors. Once this cohort of students progressed to the middle grades, those behaviors rose in frequency to 49 reported incidents of aggressive behavior. Behaviors described as disruptive increased from 18 instances in grade five to 27 in grade six. Short-term suspensions for behaviors involving inappropriate language increased from eight in grade five to 22 in grade six. While representing only a small percentage of total reason codes for short-term suspensions, those behaviors described as disrespectful to faculty or staff quadrupled in frequency from two reports in grade five to eight in grade six. A decrease in short-term suspensions for behaviors identified as inappropriate was noted. Short-term suspensions for these behaviors decreased from seven in grade five to two in grade six (see Table 3).

After they transitioned to the middle grades, the 2014 fifth grade cohort witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of short-term suspensions referrals, particularly for fights and assaultive behaviors. Behaviors that resulted in short-term suspensions identified as assaults increased from two in grade five to 23 in grade six. Similarly, there were ten short-term

Table 3

Infractions Resulting in Short Term Suspensions (2013-2014 Grade 5 Cohort)

Suspension Category	Description of Behavior	2013-2014 Grade 5 Infractions	2014-2015 Grade 6 Infractions
Subjective			
	Aggressive Behavior	27	49
	Bullying	0	0
	Disorderly Conduct	0	4
	Disruptive Behavior	18	27
	Disrespect of Faculty and Staff	2	8
	Inappropriate Behavior	7	2
	Inappropriate Language/Disrespect	8	22
	Insubordination	3	7
	Other	6	6
	Total	71	125
Objective			
	Assault on student	2	23
	Assault on school personnel-not serious	0	2
	Communicating threats	1	7
	Fighting	10	71
	Inappropriate item on school property	12	5
	Possession of a weapon (not firearm)	1	7
	Leaving class without permission	2	0
	Leaving school without permission	2	0
	Possession of marijuana	0	0
	Property Damage	1	0
	Sexual Harassment	2	4
	Theft	1	4
	Total	34	123

Note. All of the behavioral descriptions listed above are selections available to those recording discipline referrals into the PowerSchool student information system employed by the district. Those behaviors listed as *Other* were recorded by the school using the behavioral code *Other* or *Other School Defined Offense* with no accompanying narrative explanation of the behavior.

suspensions for fighting administered to grade five students in this cohort for fighting. That number jumped to 71 short-term suspensions for fighting once those students transitioned to grade six (see Table 3).

Students in the 2015 grade five cohort exhibited similar patterns in disciplinary referrals resulting in short-term suspensions in both subjective and objective categories. Subjective short-term suspensions for this cohort involving behaviors described as aggressive leapt from 31 in grade five students to 73 in students in this cohort who had progressed to the middle grades. Short-term suspensions for behaviors described as disruptive increased from 20 to 28 as students transitioned from elementary to middle school. Short-term suspensions based on behaviors identified as disrespectful to faculty and staff increased from two during the fifth grade to 14 in grade six. There was once again a decrease in behaviors labeled as inappropriate as short-term suspensions of this type decreased from nine in grade five to six once students had transitioned to middle school (see Table 4).

As with the 2014 cohort, the 2015 grade five cohort exhibited a substantial increase in the number of short-term suspensions based on assaultive behaviors and fighting. There were two short-term suspensions assigned for assaultive behavior in grade five, with this number climbing to 14 in students that had progressed to grade six. There were eight short-term suspensions issued to grade five students in this cohort for fighting which increased to 46 once these students transitioned to middle school. There were also four short-term suspensions issued to grade six students for marijuana possession, which did not occur during grade five (see Table 4).

When analyzing the 2016 grade five cohort, a decrease in the number of short-term suspensions for aggressive behavior was noted. There were 64 short-term suspensions issued to grade five students for aggressive behavior and this number dropped slightly to 60 short-term

67

Table 4

Infractions Resulting in Short Term Suspensions (2014-2015 Grade 5 Cohort)

Suspension Category	Description of Behavior	2014-2015 Grade 5 Infractions	2015-2016 Grade 6 Infractions
Subjective			
	Aggressive Behavior	31	73
	Bullying	0	2
	Disorderly Conduct	0	3
	Disruptive Behavior	20	28
	Disrespect of Faculty and Staff	2	14
	Inappropriate Behavior	9	6
	Inappropriate Language/Disrespect	10	13
	Insubordination	3	6
	Other	11	9
	Total	86	154
Objective			
	Assault on student	2	14
	Assault on school personnel-not serious	0	2
	Communicating threats	1	8
	Fighting	8	46
	Inappropriate item on school property	7	3
	Possession of a weapon (not firearm)	2	0
	Leaving class without permission	2	0
	Leaving school without permission	2	1
	Possession of marijuana	0	4
	Property Damage	0	2
	Sexual Harassment	0	2
	Theft	2	5
	Total	26	86

Note. All of the behavioral descriptions listed above are selections available to those recording discipline referrals into the PowerSchool student information system employed by the district. employed by the district. Those behaviors listed as *Other* were recorded by the school using the behavioral code *Other* or *Other School Defined Offense* with no accompanying narrative explanation of the behavior.

suspensions as students progressed to grade six. There was also a marked decrease from grade five to grade six in the number of short-term suspensions for behaviors identified as using inappropriate or disrespectful language. There were 17 such incidents noted during grade five, with this number dropping to seven in grade six. There was also a decline in short-terms suspensions for inappropriate behaviors as noted in the previous two cohorts. There were six such suspensions during grade five and three after those students transitioned to middle school. These declines were met with increases in short-term suspensions for several other subjective behavior codes. Short-term suspensions for disorderly conduct increased from two to 13 from grades five to six with students in this cohort. There were eight short-term suspensions assigned for disruptive behavior in grade five. That number increases to 23 in grade six. Short-term suspensions for behaviors determined to be disrespectful to faculty went from five instances in grade five to 20 in grade six (see Table 5).

Short-term suspensions based on objective behaviors in the 2016 grade five cohort followed patters established by the previous two cohorts. As before, there were significant increases short-term suspensions for assaultive behavior and fighting. There were nine short-term suspensions assigned to fifth-grade students in this cohort for assault and 25 once those students progressed to grade six. Short-term suspensions for fighting increased from 23 in grade five to 56 in grade six. There were also four short-term suspensions for marijuana possession during grade six and none were noted in grade five (see Table 5).

Student Perspective Findings

Student results from the Likert-scale survey provided during Phase One and Phase Four of data collection demonstrated a great deal of commonality when considering positive and negative responses. Positive responses to prompts were those rated by students as strongly

69

Table 5

Infractions Resulting in Short Term Suspensions (2015-2016 Grade 5 Cohort)

Suspension Category	Description of Behavior	2015-2016 Grade 5 Infractions	2016-2017 Grade 6 Infractions
Subjective			
	Aggressive Behavior	64	60
	Bullying	1	3
	Disorderly Conduct	2	13
	Disruptive Behavior	8	23
	Disrespect of Faculty and Staff	5	20
	Inappropriate Behavior	6	3
	Inappropriate Language/Disrespect	17	7
	Insubordination	2	5
	Other	5	14
	Total	110	148
Objective			
	Assault on student	9	25
	Assault on school personnel-not serious	0	0
	Communicating threats	2	9
	Fighting	23	56
	Inappropriate item on school property	8	11
	Possession of a weapon (not firearm)	0	1
	Leaving class without permission	0	1
	Leaving school without permission	0	1
	Possession of marijuana	0	4
	Property Damage	3	4
	Sexual Harassment	0	4
	Theft	1	0
	Total	46	116

Note. All of the behavioral descriptions listed above are selections available to those recording discipline referrals into the PowerSchool student information system employed by the district. employed by the district. Those behaviors listed as *Other* were recorded by the school using the behavioral code *Other* or *Other School Defined Offense* with no accompanying narrative explanation of the behavior.

agree, agree, or somewhat agree. Responses were considered negative if students responded with strongly disagree, disagree, or somewhat disagree. A response of neither agree nor disagree was considered a neutral response.

Student responses to prompts about academic engagement demonstrated that students in fifth and sixth grade held a generally positive perception of academic engagement (see Table 6). When asked if they felt challenged at school, 76.1% of fifth-grade students provided a positive response. When considering this same prompt, 78.8% of sixth-grade students also provided a positive response. As illustrated in Table 6, this trend continued for all prompts that focused on academic engagement, with little variation between positive and negative responses during Phase One and Phase Four.

As shown on Table 7, the similarities between positive and negative responses continued with prompts regarding student and teacher relationships. For example, when responding to the prompt, "I like my teachers", 94% of fifth grade students responded positively during Phase One while 90.8% provided affirmative responses during Phase 4 of data collection. When considering the prompt, "My teachers listen to me", 91.4% of grade five students provided positive responses during Phase One and 90.3% of grade six students responded positively during Phase Four of data collection. One notable exception to this trend was student responses to the prompt, "I can get help from my teachers on my schoolwork when I need it". In responding to this prompt, 94.6% of fifth grade student agreed with this statement. Sixth grade responses to this prompt were still positive, but the percentage of student who provided positive responses decreased to 86.9%.

There were considerable differences in the individual levels of agreement in student responses to prompts regarding student and teacher relationships. While most students agreed

Table 6

Student Questionnaire Replies to Prompts about Academic Engagement Comparing Phase One

Survey Responses to Phase Four Survey Responses

Question	Phase				%			
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel challenged at school.	P1	12.9	35.0	28.2	12.1	5.7	3.2	2.9
	P4	18.4	30.0	30.4	8.2	4.3	5.8	2.9
The work I do in school helps we when I am not in school.	P1	20.0	34.7	31.4	6.1	2.1	4.3	1.4
	P4	18.4	31.4	31.4	9.7	3.9	3.4	1.9
Good grades are important to me.	P1	79.3	17.1	2.8	0.4	0.4	0.0	0.0
	P4	85.0	11.6	2.4	0.5	0.5	0.0	0.0
I get bored at school.	P1	0.7	5.7	18.2	20.7	34	17.8	2.9
	P4	2.5	10.1	16	21.8	38.3	9.3	1.9
It is hard for me to get all of my homework done.	P1	0.4	1.4	3.2	9.7	15.8	38	31.5
	P4	2.5	3.4	3.9	10.1	18.4	39.3	22.3

Note. 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 5 = Somewhat Disagree, 6 = Disagree, 7 = Strongly Disagree. P1 = Phase One, P4 = Phase Four. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants that selected that response.

Table 7

Student Questionnaire Replies to Prompts about Student-Teacher Relationships Comparing

Phase One Survey Responses to Phase Four Survey Responses

Question	Phase	1	2	3	% 4	5	6	7
I like my teachers	P1	61.1	27.5	5.4	2.3	2.1	0.4	0.7
	P4	47.3	36.7	6.8	3.4	2.9	1.9	1.0
I can trust my teachers to help me with problems besides schoolwork	P1	28.6	33.6	20.7	10.4	2.5	1.8	2.5
	P4	26.6	23.7	23.2	11.6	5.3	4.8	4.8
My teachers care about me	P1	52.1	31.1	10.7	3.9	0.7	0.7	0.7
	P4	35.7	39.6	12.6	5.3	2.4	2.4	1.9
I can get help from my teachers on my schoolwork when I need it	P1	42.5	41.4	10.7	3.2	1.8	0.4	0.0
	P4	27.5	37.2	22.2	5.8	0.5	3.4	3.4
My teachers listen to me	P1	31.9	44.1	15.4	5.4	1.8	0.4	1.1
	P4	42.5	30.9	16.9	3.4	3.4	1.0	1.9

Note. 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 5 = Somewhat Disagree, 6 = Disagree, 7 = Strongly Disagree. P1 = Phase One, P4 = Phase Four. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants that selected that response.

that they liked their teachers, 61.1% of fifth grade students selected "Strongly Agree" to respond to this prompt, while only 47.3% of sixth graders selected the same response for that prompt. When considering the prompt, "My teachers care about me", 93.9% of fifth grade students provided a positive response and 87.9% of sixth grade students responded affirmatively. However, 52.1% of fifth-grade students responded with "Strongly Agree". The percentage of sixth-grade students who chose "Strongly Agree" for the same prompt declined to 35.7%. The prompt "I can get help from my teachers on my schoolwork when I need it" also exhibited declines in level of student agreement between Phase One and Phase Four of data collection. When reacting to this prompt, 42.5% students chose "Strongly Agree" during Phase One of data collection while only 27.5% of students selected "Strongly Agree" during Phase Four. Interestingly, 42.5% of grade six students responded that they "Strongly Agree" with the prompt, "My teachers listen to me" which is an increase from 31.9% of fifth-grade students who selected "Strongly Agree" for the same prompt (see Table 7).

The same pattern of generally positive responses from students in both Phase One and Phase Four of data collection continued with prompts that queried students about school engagement (see Table 8). When presented with the prompt, "School is important to me", 95.4% of fifth-grade students responded affirmatively during Phase One of data collection. This percentage decreased to 87.9% of sixth-grade students responding positively during Phase Four of data collection, but this was not coupled with a significant increase in negative responses. Neutral responses to this prompt increased from 1.8% during Phase One to 7.2% during Phase Four of data collection.

Even though the trend of mostly positive responses continued with the school engagement theme, significant differences in the level of agreement between student opinions

Table 8

Student Questionnaire Replies to Prompts about School Engagement Comparing Phase One

Survey Responses to Phase Four Survey Responses

Question	Phase	1	2	3	% 4	5	6	7
School is important to me	P1	58.1	25.1	12.2	1.8	1.4	0.7	0.7
	P4	42.5	32.4	13.0	7.2	2.9	0.0	1.9
I would recommend my school to someone moving to my town	P1	32.7	34.9	14.0	12.6	1.8	2.5	1.4
	P4	18.4	18.8	25.1	14.0	8.7	7.2	7.7
Students at my school treat each other well	P1	4.7	20.8	40.1	12.9	11.1	5.4	5.0
	P4	15.5	25.2	28.2	9.7	9.7	5.8	5.8
The rules at my school are fair	P1	34.4	38.0	15.1	5.7	3.2	2.2	1.4
	P4	22.7	31.9	21.3	7.7	6.8	4.8	4.8
I feel safe at school	P1	39.4	30.5	20.8	5.4	2.2	0.7	1.1
	P4	35.3	34.8	15.0	6.8	2.9	2.4	2.9

Note. 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 5 = Somewhat Disagree, 6 = Disagree, 7 = Strongly Disagree. P1 = Phase One, P4 = Phase Four. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants that selected that response.

emerged (see Table 8). When considering the prompt, "The rules at my school are fair", 87.5% of fifth grade students provided positive responses during Phase One of data collection. Given this same prompt, 75.9% of grade six students provided affirmative responses to this prompt during Phase Four of data collection. Students also differed in the level of agreement with this prompt. During Phase One of data collection, 34.4% of fifth-grade students responded that they felt the school rules were fair compared to 22.7% of grade six students.

Grade five students also displayed a more positive overall impression of their school. When provided the prompt, "I would recommend my school to someone moving to my town", 81.6% of grade five students provided a positive response during Phase One of data collection while only 62.3% of sixth grade students responded affirmatively to this prompt during Phase Four of data collection. Furthermore, 32.7% of fifth-grade students selected that they "Strongly Agree" with this prompt, but only 18.4% of grade six student selected this same level of agreement (see Table 8).

Student responses to the prompt "Students at my school treat each other well", demonstrated general agreement, but a lower percentage of positive responses when compared to other prompts within the school engagement theme (see Table 8). Only 65.6% of fifth-grade students responded positively to this prompt during Phase One of data collection while 68.9% of grade six students provided positive responses during Phase Four. Additionally, only 4.7% of fifth-grade students responded that they "Strongly Agree" with this statement compared with 15.5% of grade six students. Results from this response also demonstrated that during Phase One of data collection, 40.1% of fifth-grade only "Somewhat Agree" that students at their school treat each other well while 28.2% of sixth-grade students provided this same response during Phase Four of data collection.

Similarities in student responses were again demonstrated when students responded to prompts that involved self-perception (see Table 9). Students reported feeling well-liked at school with 79.9% of fifth-graders and 82.1% of grade six students providing positive responses to the prompt, "People at school like me". Student responses were very similar when responding to the prompt, "I enjoy going to school" with 78.6% of fifth-grade students responding positively to this prompt during Phase One of data collection and 77.4% of sixth-grade students providing positive responses during Phase Four of data collection.

One notable exception to this trend in similar responses was responses to the prompt, "I think I am smart". While 91.4% of grade five students provided positive responses to this prompt during Phase One compared with 79.7% of grade six students responding positively during Phase Four of data collection. Additionally, 39.6% of grade five students responded to this prompt by selecting "Strongly Agree" while only 27.1% of sixth grade students chose the same level of agreement (see Table 9).

The most pressing transition concerns for students who participated in this study were academic in nature (see Table 10). Students identified the anticipated amount or difficulty of the work as their most urgent concern, with 32.1% of students ranking this as their top concern. This was followed closely by concerns for their grades as 31.3% selected this theme as their greatest concern with the transition to middle school. Bullying was the third highest-ranked concern, with 18.3% of students selecting this as their greatest concern. Movement and friendships were ranked fourth and fifth, respectively.

Academic concerns were also most likely to be ranked second on the list of student transition concerns (see Table 10). The amount or difficulty of the work was the most likely second choice for students as 31.3% of students ranked this second on the list of transition

Table 9

Student Questionnaire Replies to Prompts about Self-Perceptions Comparing Phase One Survey

Responses to Phase Four Survey Responses

Question	Phase	1	2	3	% 4	5	6	7
I think I am smart	P1	39.6	36.4	15.4	4.3	1.4	1.1	1.8
	P4	27.1	36.2	16.4	9.7	2.9	2.9	4.8
When I am at school, I feel like I belong	P1	17.9	36.6	21.5	14.7	4.7	2.5	2.2
	P4	24.2	33.8	18.8	12.6	3.9	3.4	3.9
People at school like me	P1	19.6	33.2	27.1	11.8	3.9	2.5	1.8
	P4	36.2	25.6	20.3	6.8	3.4	4.8	2.9
I have friends that I can trust to help me with my problems	P1	58.9	18.9	10.7	4.6	3.2	1.8	1.8
	P4	39.6	27.5	16.9	6.8	2.4	2.9	3.9
I enjoy going to school	P1	29.3	28.6	20.7	8.6	5.7	1.8	5.4
	P4	26.6	30.5	20.3	12.5	0.8	3.9	5.5

Note. 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 5 = Somewhat Disagree, 6 = Disagree, 7 = Strongly Disagree. P1 = Phase One, P4 = Phase Four. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants that selected that response.

Table 10

Student Rankings of Their Five Greatest Perceived Concerns about the Transition to Middle School

| | Student Ranking | | | | |
Concern	1	2	3	4	5
Amount of difficulty of the work	32.1	31.3	22.1	9.2	5.3
Grades	31.3	26.7	21.4	15.3	5.3
Bullying	18.3	20.6	9.9	22.9	28.2
Friendships	7.6	9.2	24.4	25.2	33.6
Movement	10.7	12.2	22.1	27.5	27.5

Note. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants who ranked a given concern in order of importance.

concerns. Students' grades remained of great concern to students as 26.7% ranked this concern second. Once again, bullying was ranked third with 20.6% of students selecting this as their second greatest concern about the transition to middle school. Movement and friendships remained fourth and fifth respectively. Establishing or maintain friendships was identified by students as the least concerning of the five themes, with 7.63% of students ranking it as their primary concern and 33.6% ranking it as the least concerning aspect of the transition to middle school.

Echoing the sentiment that social maters were the least of their concerns, fifth-grade students listed friendships, including making new friends and maintaining existing friendships, as the greatest benefit of the transition to middle school with 26.6% ranking it first on their list (see Table 11). Twenty-five percent of students listed independence as the primary benefit of the transition to middle school. The fewest percentage of students selected extracurricular opportunities as the principal benefit of the transition to middle school as only 11.7% of students ranked it as their most pertinent benefit. Students did, however, consider extracurricular opportunities as the second-most important benefit of the transition to middle school as 28.1% of students ranked this second on the list, followed by 25% of students selecting friendships second. New school experiences were perceived as the least beneficial aspect of the transition to middle school with 28.1% of students ranking this the last of their choices.

Parent Perspective Findings

As with the student responses to the Likert-style questionnaire, parent responses during Phase One of data collection were, in general, similar to the responses provided during Phase Four of data collection. There were, however, noticeable differences in positive parent responses to some prompts, particularly those prompts in the parent-school relationships theme. Parent

Table 11

Student Rankings of Their Give Greatest Perceived Benefits about the Transition to Middle

School

	Student Ranking				
Benefit	1	2	3	4	5
Friendships	26.6	25.0	14.1	21.1	13.3
Independence	25.0	18.8	25.0	13.3	18.0
New school experiences	20.3	11.0	18.8	21.9	28.1
Personal growth	16.4	17.2	20.3	19.5	26.6
Extracurricular activities	11.7	28.1	21.9	24.2	14.1

Note. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants who ranked a given benefit in order of importance.

responses to prompts were considered positive if they were rated as strongly agree, agree, or somewhat agree. Negative responses were those in which parents responded with strongly disagree, disagree, or somewhat disagree. A response was determined to be neutral if the parent selected neither agree nor disagree when responding to a prompt.

Parent responses to prompts in the academic theme were, for the most part, in agreement in terms of positive or negative responses, with several notable exceptions (see Table 12). When responding to the prompt, "My child can get extra help in school if he/she needs it", 18.1% of parents provided a negative response during Phase One of data collection, but after students had progressed to middle school, only 5.7% of parents responded negatively to this prompt during Phase Four of data collection. The prompt, "It is hard for my child to get all their homework done" elicited a neutral response from 16.7% of parents during Phase One of data collection, with the number of neutral responses falling to 5.7% in Phase Four. The most glaring variation in parent responses to questions concerning academic engagement occurred when parents were presented with the prompt, "The work my child does in school is relevant to their lives outside of school". During Phase One of data collection, 70.9% of parents provided positive responses to this prompt. This percentage declined to 51.9% during Phase Four of data collection. Additionally, 22.9% of parents provided neutral responses to this prompt during Phase Four compared to 9.1% of parents providing the same response during Phase One of data collection.

Parent responses to prompts in the parent-school relationship theme demonstrated a wide variety of perceptions regarding the efficacy of the connections that exist between the school and the home (see Table 13). When presented with the prompt, "There is effective communication between the school and home", 26.6% of parents provided a negative response during Phase One

Table 12

Parent Questionnaire Responses to Prompts about Academic Engagement Comparing Phase

One Survey Responses to Phase Four Survey Responses

| | | | | | % | | | |
Question	Phase	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My child feels challenged at school	P1	27.3	43.6	20.0	1.8	5.5	1.8	0.0
	P4	31.4	34.3	22.9	2.9	8.6	0.0	0.0
My child can get extra help at school if he/she needs it	P1	18.8	34.6	23.6	5.5	10.9	3.6	3.6
	P4	40.0	25.7	17.1	11.4	0.0	5.7	0.0
It is hard for my child to get all their homework done	P1	1.8	7.3	16.7	16.7	7.3	34.6	16.4
	P4	2.9	2.9	11.4	5.7	14.3	34.3	28.6
The work my child does in school is relevant to their lives outside of school	P1	12.7	25.5	32.7	9.1	10.9	9.1	0.0
	P4	2.9	25.7	22.9	22.9	14.3	8.6	2.9
My child says he/she is bored at school	P1	0.0	1.8	1.8	7.3	12.7	45.4	30.9
	P4	3.9	1.8	2.9	5.7	5.7	40.0	37.1

Note. 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 5 = Somewhat Disagree, 6 = Disagree, 7 = Strongly Disagree. P1 = Phase One, P4 = Phase Four. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants that selected that response.

Table 13

Parent Questionnaire Responses to Prompts about Parent-School Relationships Comparing

Phase One Survey Responses to Phase Four Survey Responses

					%			
Question	Phase	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
There is effective communication between the school and home	P1	18.2	40.0	14.6	0.0	18.2	3.6	5.5
	P4	31.4	34.2	17.1	0.0	8.6	2.9	5.7
There are opportunities for parents to be involved at school	P1	29.1	29.1	21.8	3.6	9.1	3.6	3.6
	P4	34.3	40.0	20.0	2.9	2.9	0.0	0.0
Besides Back to School/Open House, I have been invited to visit my child's classroom	P1	23.6	32.7	3.6	7.3	3.6	20.0	9.1
	P4	5.7	11.4	11.4	17.1	0.0	31.4	22.9
The school encourages parent feedback to improve educational services	P1	58.9	18.9	10.7	4.6	3.2	1.8	1.8
	P4	39.6	27.5	16.9	6.8	2.4	2.9	3.9
Parents and educators at my child's school work together as a team	P1	29.3	28.6	20.7	8.6	5.7	1.8	5.4
	P4	26.6	30.5	20.3	12.5	0.8	3.9	5.5

Note. 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 5 = Somewhat Disagree, 6 = Disagree, 7 = Strongly Disagree. P1 = Phase One, P4 = Phase Four. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants that selected that response.

of data collection. This number dropped to 17.6% of parents responding negatively to this prompt during Phase Four. A more striking difference was noted when parents responded to the prompt, "There are opportunities for parents to be involved at school". During Phase One of data collection, 16.3% provided a negative response to this prompt. Only 2.9% of parents provided a negative response to this prompt during Phase Four of data collection. This perception changed considerably when parents were queried about direct involvement in the classroom. When asked to reply to the prompt, "Besides Back to School/Open House, I have been invited to visit my child's classroom", 34.9% of parents provided negative responses during Phase One of data collection while 54.3% of parents responded negatively during Phase Four of data collection. An additional 17.1% of parents provided a neutral response during Phase Four.

There was, however, a general consensus regarding the school and the home working together. When presented with the prompt "Parents and educators at my child's school work together as a team, 78.6% of parents provided a positive response during Phase One of data collection while 77.4% of parents responded positively in Phase Four of data collection.

Prompts about school engagement revealed a greater sense of consensus from parents both before and after their children transitioned to middle school (see Table 14). Parents were in strong agreement that they believe their child thinks school is important as 92.8% provided positive responses in Phase One and 90.8% responded affirmatively during Phase Four. When presented with the prompt, "Students at my child's school treat each other well", 74.6% of parents responding during Phase One of data collection responded positively while 71.4% provided positive responses during Phase Four. It was noted that parents differed in their level of agreement to this statement as 12.7% of parents during Phase One of data collection selected that they "Strongly Agree" with this statement as compared to just 5.7% of parents responding in

Table 14

Parent Questionnaire Responses to Prompts about School Engagement Comparing Phase One

Survey Responses to Phase Four Survey Responses

| Question | Phase | % | | | | | | |
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My child thinks school is important	P1	45.5	40.0	7.3	1.8	5.6	0.0	0.0
	P4	45.7	42.9	2.9	2.9	0.0	2.9	2.9
I would recommend my child's school to someone moving to my town	P1	32.7	34.6	10.9	9.1	0.0	5.5	7.3
	P4	31.4	48.6	0.0	8.6	5.7	0.0	5.7
Students at my child's school treat each other well	P1	12.7	34.6	27.3	5.5	7.3	10.9	1.8
	P4	5.7	40.0	25.7	5.7	8.6	5.7	8.6
The rules at my child's school are fair	P1	23.6	50.9	14.6	5.5	1.8	1.8	1.8
	P4	25.7	51.4	8.6	5.7	2.9	0.0	5.7
My child feels safe at school	P1	21.8	40.0	14.6	9.1	5.5	7.3	1.8
	P4	20.0	57.1	8.6	8.6	0.0	5.7	0.0

Note. 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 5 = Somewhat Disagree, 6 = Disagree, 7 = Strongly Disagree. P1 = Phase One, P4 = Phase Four. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants that selected that response.

kind during Phase Four. Interestingly, parents perceived that their children felt safer at middle school than at elementary school. During Phase One of data collection, 76.4% of parents responded positively to the prompt, "My child feels safe at school". Responses posted during Phase Four of data collection found that 85.7% of parents provided positive responses to this prompt.

Parent responses were also in close agreement when considering prompts about student self-perceptions. When presented with the prompt, "My child feels well-liked at school", 87.3% of parents provided a positive response during Phase One and 88.6% responded affirmatively during Phase Four of data collection. Parents also found close agreement when considering the prompt, "My child enjoys going to school". During Phase One of data collection, 81.5% of parents responded positively to this prompt and 82.9% of parents provided a positive response during Phase Four of data collection. One exception to this agreement was parent responses to the prompt, "The school expresses high expectations for my child". During Phase One of data collection, 76.4% of parents provided positive responses that prompt while 88.4% of parents responded positively during Phase Four of data collection (see Table 15).

Parents provided 172 responses to the request to list factors they were concerned about when considering their child's transition to middle school. These responses were coded and grouped into twelve categories based on common themes (see Table 16). The most common concern listed by parents was related to student-teacher relationships, with 36 parents noting this as their primary concern. Descriptions of these concerns included phrases such as, "my child being lost in the shuffle", "not feeling that the teachers care", and "my child going unnoticed by teachers". Bullying was identified by 30 parents, making it the second greatest concern listed, with 28 parents simply using the term "bullying" without further explanation. Social pressures,

Table 15

Parent Questionnaire Responses to Prompts about Self-Perceptions Comparing Phase One

Survey Responses to Phase Four Survey Responses

| | | | | | % | | | |
Question	Phase	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The school expresses high	P1	21.8	40.0	14.6	9.1	5.5	7.3	1.8
expectations for my child.	P4	25.7	51.4	11.4	8.6	0.0	0.0	2.9
My child feels valued at	P1	23.6	38.2	21.8	5.5	3.6	3.6	3.6
school.	P4	20.0	42.9	22.9	5.7	2.9	2.9	2.9
My child feels well-liked by	P1	18.2	49.1	20.0	7.3	1.8	3.6	0.0
other students.	P4	11.4	54.3	22.9	2.9	5.7	0.0	2.9
My child has friends at	P1	25.5	49.1	16.4	5.5	3.6	0.0	0.0
school that he/she can trust.	P4	22.8	54.3	14.3	5.7	0.0	0.0	2.9
My child enjoys going to	P1	25.9	38.9	16.7	7.4	5.6	3.7	1.9
school.	P4	34.3	40.0	8.6	11.4	0.0	2.9	2.9

Note. 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 5 = Somewhat Disagree, 6 = Disagree, 7 = Strongly Disagree. P1 = Phase One, P4 = Phase Four. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants that selected that response.

Table 16

Common Themes in Parent Listings of Concerns about Their Child Transitioning to Middle

School

Concern	Number of Responses
Student and teacher relationships	36
Bullying	30
Social pressures	21
Amount and/or difficulty of the work	20
Parent and teacher relationships	12
Organizational concerns	11
School engagement	9
Safety	7
Grades	7
Decreased academic rigor	7
Personal responsibility	6
Transition stress	6

Note. Numerical values represent the number of parent responses coded into that category of concerns

with 21 mentions, and the amount or difficulty of school work, identified by 20 parents, were also commonly listed concerns about the transition to middle school.

Parents provided 87 responses to the request to list things they perceived to be a benefit when considering the middle school transition. Parent responses to this prompt were coded and grouped into eight categories based on common themes. As illustrated in Table 17, two themes emerged as the most prevalent by a wide margin. Parents were most excited about their children having opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. Twenty-eight parents listed "extracurriculars" as a benefit of transitioning to middle school. Of those twenty-eight, six parents listed "extracurriculars" or "extracurricular activities" without further explanation, while sixteen parents cataloged the opportunity to participate in school sports as a benefit of the middle school transition. Parents also perceived the opportunity for their children to experience personal growth as a benefit of the transition to middle school. Twenty-seven parents listed this benefit using phrases such as, "learning independence", "a new milestone", and "watching him grow as a person" to describe this perceived benefit of the middle school transition.

Teacher Perspective Findings

During Phase Three of data collection, teachers were presented with the five greatest concerns and benefits that students identified regarding the transition to middle school. Teachers were asked to rank those according to how they believed that that their students would rank them.

When considering student concerns, 28.6% of grade five teachers perceived that the potential for bullying would be the greatest concern for their students (see Table 18). The amount or difficulty of the work was selected as the most pressing concern by 23.8% of respondents. Of those fifth-grade teachers who responded to the survey, 19.1% selected friendships or grades

90

Table 17

Common Themes in Parent Listings of Perceived Benefits of Their Child Transitioning to Middle

School

Perceived Benefit	Number of Responses
Extracurricular activities	28
Personal growth	27
Social opportunities	15
New school experiences	13
New learning opportunities	12
New classes and academic opportunities	10
Changing classes	4
New teachers	3

Note. Numerical values represent the number of parent responses coded into that category of perceived benefit

Table 18

Grade Five Teacher Rankings of Their Perceptions of Students' Five Greatest Concerns about

the Transition to Middle School

Concern	Teacher Ranking				
	1	2	3	4	5
Bullying	28.6	19.1	23.8	9.5	19.1
Amount of difficulty of the work	23.8	33.3	14.3	19.1	9.5
Grades	19.1	14.3	23.8	23.8	19.1
Friendships	19.1	23.8	33.3	19.1	4.8
Movement	9.5	9.5	4.8	28.6	47.6

Note. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants who ranked a given concern in order of importance.

as their students' greatest concerns about transitioning to middle school. The amount or difficult of the work was listed by 33.3% of grade five teachers as the second most concerning aspect of the middle school transition, and 33.3% listed friendships as the third most likely factor to cause students stress during the transition to middle school.

When reflecting upon what students listed as perceived benefits of the transition to middle school, 38.1% of grade five teachers listed independence as what they believed was the most important to students. Grade five teachers also believed that extracurricular activities were perceived by students as highly beneficial as 28.6% listed this as what they felt students would identify as the greatest benefit of transitioning to the middle grades. These opinions were then juxtaposed as 42.9% of grade five teachers ranked extracurricular activities as the second most important benefit identified by students while independence was listed second by 33.3% of teachers. There was general agreement as the benefit of personal growth was ranked last by 71.4% of teachers (see Table 19).

Sixth grade teachers believed that students were most concerned about maintaining or fostering new friendships. Forty percent of sixth-grade teachers ranked this item as the primary concern for students that were transitioning to the middle school. Friendships were also selected by 40% of respondents as the second most frequently identified concern. Movement was most likely to be ranked as the least concerning aspect of the transition to the middle school by sixth-grade teachers, as 50% of teachers placed it last on their list of ranked concerns (see Table 20).

Grade six teachers, like their fifth-grade counterparts, felt that students would be most excited about the independence that middle school offers. Forty percent of sixth-grade teachers believed that students would identify this as the most appealing aspect of transitioning to the

Table 19

Grade Five Teacher Rankings of Their Perceptions of Students' Five Greatest Perceived Benefits

about the Transition to Middle School

| Benefit | Teacher Ranking | | | | |
	1	2	3	4	5
Independence	38.1	33.3	14.3	4.8	9.5
Extracurricular activities	28.6	42.9	19.1	4.8	4.8
Friendships	23.8	4.8	28.6	33.3	9.5
New school experiences	9.5	19.1	28.6	38.1	4.8
Personal growth	0.0	0.0	9.5	19.1	71.4

Note. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants who ranked a given benefit in order of importance.

Table 20

Grade Six Teacher Rankings of Their Perceptions of Students' Five Greatest Concerns about the

Transition to Middle School

| Concern | Teacher Ranking | | | | |
	1	2	3	4	5
Friendships	40.0	40.0	10.0	0.0	10.0
Amount of difficulty of the work	20.0	0.0	40.0	40.0	0.0
Bullying	20.0	30.0	10.0	30.0	10.0
Grades	10.0	10.0	20.0	30.0	30.0
Movement	10.0	20.0	20.0	0.0	50.0

Note. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants who ranked a given concern in order of importance.

middle grades. The themes of friendship and extracurricular activities both garnered 40% of teacher selections regarding the second-highest ranked benefits of transitioning to middle school. Seventy percent of teachers indicated that they believed that students would identify personal growth as the least beneficial aspect of the transition to middle school (see Table 21).

When presented with the prompt, "What, if any, transition activities are you aware of that are sponsored by the district?," responses were received from all 21 fifth grade teachers who participated in the survey. Of those, 17 mentioned a trip to the appropriate middle school, two offered required transition meetings for exceptional children, and two stated that they were not aware of any district supported transition activities. Sixth grade teachers provided ten responses to this prompt. Six mentioned a fifth-grade visit to the school, two described mandatory transition meetings for exceptional children, one respondent could not recall any district sponsored events and one teacher provided an unrelated response.

Teachers were then asked to describe any transition activities that their individual schools organized. This garnered 19 responses from grade five educators. Nine respondents again cited a visit to the appropriate middle school. There were three mentions of an orientation or "step-up" night, three responses indicated that the school did not plan any transition activities, two responses were unrelated to the prompt, one respondent described a classroom visit from a middle school student and one response stated that the students began rotating teachers to model the movement between classes that would occur and the middle school.

Although only ten sixth-grade teachers responded to the survey, they provided fifteen transition activities that were organized by their schools. There were five mentions of a "step-up" night or orientation. Three respondents stated that administration visited new sixth grade homerooms during the first days of school to clarify middle school expectations. There were

96

Table 21

Grade Six Teacher Rankings of Their Perceptions of Students' Five Greatest Perceived Benefits

about the Transition to Middle School

	Teacher Ranking				
Benefit	1	2	3	4	5
Independence	40.0	10.0	10.0	30.0	10.0
Extracurricular activities	30.0	40.0	20.0	10.0	0.0
Friendships	20.0	40.0	30.0	0.0	10.0
Personal growth	10.0	0.0	0.0	20.0	70.0
New school experiences	0.0	10.0	40.0	40.0	10.0

Note. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants who ranked a given benefit in order of importance.

three responses that claimed the fifth-grade trip to the middle school was a school sponsored activity. Two respondents said that school counselors visited classrooms to discuss middle school expectations, one response detailed the rehearsal of movement around the school during the first days of the school year, and one teacher stated there were "Curriculum Nights" for parents but did not elaborate.

The next prompt asked teachers to describe activities they thought should be undertaken prior to the transition to middle school to better prepare students for a new learning environment. There was a total of 20 responses from fifth-grade teachers. Six responses were unrelated or did not describe activities. This included responses such as, "They need to be more responsible", or, "I don't like the way the middle school schedules electives". Three responses requested visits from middles school teachers to discuss changing expectations. Two respondents suggested summer orientation or "ice-breaker" activities. There were several recommendations for activities to assist students with organizational concerns including two respondents who suggested practice with padlocks and two proposals for students to learn how to switch classes effectively. One teacher advocated for more effective vertical articulation with the middle school, one who felt there should be more parent-centered activities to prepare them for the middle school, and one teacher declared that students "integrate well with change" and therefore no transition activities were necessary.

When sixth-grade teachers were provided with the same prompt described above, they supplied seven responses. Three of those who replied to this prompt described the need for greater articulation between fifth and sixth-grade teachers. There were two unrelated responses, one respondent suggested that students learn to move efficiently between classes, and one suggested a "Ready Packet" but did not provide further detail.

Teachers were then asked to describe activities they felt would be helpful to students after they transition to the middle grades. Sixteen responses were received from grade five teachers. Seven of those responses indicated that teachers are unfamiliar with what strategies might be available to students after the transition to middle school. As one teacher provided, "I am unsure because I don't know what happens at the middle school after they arrive." Three respondents recommended having time set aside to teach students appropriate organizational skills, two responses suggested a visit from recently transitioned sixth grade students to describe their experience, two others did not describe any specific activities, and one response suggested sessions designed to allow students to get to know each other better. On a positive note, one teacher stated they believed that the middle school that received their students had strong supports in place for students transitioning to grade six.

Nine sixth grade teachers responded to the prompt inquiring about post-transition activities. Two responses suggested teaching organizational skills to students, and two others recommended parent informational sessions to familiarize parents with middle grades expectations. Conducting team building activities, teaching study skills, one-on-one discussions with school counselors, and providing students with a mentor from a higher grade level were each forwarded by a single respondent. One respondent provided a response unrelated to the prompt.

The final prompt presented to fifth-grade teachers requested that they propose specific skills or information that they believed students needed prior to transitioning to the middle grades. There were 25 responses recorded for this prompt. Eight of the responses described personal accountability or responsibility as a prerequisite skill necessary for middle school. Organizational skills and time-management were each noted in six responses. Two responses did

not describe any specific skills or information, with one respondent placing the onus on sixth-grade teachers by remarking, "If the teachers and faculty are competent, the students should adjust easily."

When responding to this same prompt, sixth-grade teachers provided ten responses. Five of those responses described organization as a prerequisite skill that students should learn prior to transitioning to middle school. Three respondents mentioned specific academic skills such as "Students need to know their times tables", or, "They should be able to write a complete paragraph." One teacher suggested time-management and one other recommended skills in conflict resolution.

The final prompt of the Phase Three teacher survey was presented only to grade six teachers. This prompt asked teachers to describe skills that students frequently lacked when they transition to the middle grades. This prompt garnered eight responses. Five of those responses described specific academic skills such as "Fundamental math skills", or, "reading comprehension." Two respondents believed that students lacked prerequisite organizational skills necessary for middle school, and one teacher described a need for students to learn self-regulation by stating that student need to be able to "deal with their emotions."

Principal Perspective Findings

Six principals, three elementary school and three middle school, participated in a focus group with the purpose of gaining insight into the perspectives of school administrators regarding the transition from elementary to middle school. The interview was conducted in a semi-structured format to allow for follow-up questions based on responses from the focus group participants.

Principal E1 has been an elementary school principal for three years, all three years in her current position in the district. Principal E2 has been both middle grades principal and an elementary school principal. She has been in her current role as an elementary school principal for the past three years. Principal E3 has been an elementary school principal for three years, all in her current position. Principal M1 is a middle school principal with three years of administrative experience in his current position. Principal M2 has been a middle school principal for seven years, all of those years at the same school. Principal M3 has been in her current position as a middle grades principal for the past three years.

When asked about district initiatives, the middle school principals mentioned the middle school visits that the district organized on an annual basis. Principal M2 liked the fact that all of the visits across the district took place on the same day remarking, "One of the things I like about it is its one set day where all of the kids get to move. You're not trying to come up with different programs, things like that." Principal M1 added, "I like the fact that the district handles transportation. We just have to have a program ready for our incoming sixth graders." When asked to elaborate about those programs, Principal M1 stated:

> Well, we usually have an overview of the school; a tour of the school. We also have…they are not used to doing encore classes or electives, so our encore teachers usually do a little…our band plays a little bit, our orchestra plays, and our chorus sings. Then we have other little presentations. Just a nice way to show the transition from elementary to…those are the cool things we can eventually get to in middle school.

The participants were then asked to discuss vertical articulation between the elementary schools and the middle schools. Principal E1 commented, "Last year, we had a day where we, as elementary school teachers, went over, we kind of followed along what a day would be like for

our students rising up", but went on to say that they did not actually sit down with the fifth-grade teachers to discuss students beyond cursory discussions about programs. This was echoed by Principal M2, who added vertical articulation at her site was limited to transition meetings required by programs for exceptional children. Principal E3 then interjected:

One thing we do is use placement cards when children move from one grade to the next, so when we do those with our fifth-grade students, I bundle those up and send, I take those to the middle school so that they have...they have information like what kids shouldn't be together or…things that we share between grade levels, but we don't sit down and talk about it.

Principal M1 added:

I purposely don't really ask what they are doing in fifth-grade and what the expectations are for them in sixth grade. I like to start fresh. I like for my teachers to start fresh. I don't want any preconceived notions about this kid and how they acted in fifth grade. It helps us to start that transition. That's why we don't do that.

Principal M2 commented:

We could use some more, you know, direction from the district, I guess, but I don't like the idea of being told that "You have to do this or that." I like that we can kind of…we are allowed to do our own thing.

Principals M1, M3 and E1 indicated their agreement with this statement.

In general, the middle school principals did not acknowledge directly engaging staff members in professional development involving current research about adolescent development. This was confirmed as Principal M1 stated:

Nothing but what the district might provide for professional development, but it's not like, "because you're a sixth-grade teacher you need to be sitting in on this". I think hopefully, professionally, because they are in this business, they are kind of aware, and they are taking self-initiative, whether they are a veteran teacher or a brand-new teacher. But a formal…we don't.

Principal M3 further provided, "I share research articles throughout the year, like in Monday morning memos and things like that on middle school behavior and motivations and things like that." Principal M1 admitted that it has been something he had been considering. As he stated:

We don't do it per se, as far as to sit down and talk about the psyche of a middle school kid, but it is absolutely something I've been trying to put more and more thought to. Thinking about what kind of professional development I could do with the whole staff because I think sometimes teachers miss that connection of becoming an adolescent or the mental state of an adolescent. I think it is absolutely something we need to look into, but right now we don't do it formally.

The lack of continuing education provided to staff led to very brief answers when principals were asked how they, without addressing current research on adolescent development with staff, could assure that classroom activities were developmentally appropriate. Principal M2 replied simply, "Walkthroughs. I use frequent walkthroughs so I know what they are doing". Principal M1 added, "I use my counselors to help with that." Principal M3 affirmed that response be stating, "Yes, counselors are key."

The questions then turned to student perceptions. The elementary school principals were asked what they perceived were the students' greatest concerns about transitioning to middle school. Principal E3 said:

Hallways. It used to be lockers, but middle schools don't…I don't think they are using

lockers at the middle school we feed into anymore and I think they know that now. They

are afraid of getting lost, and they are afraid of not having the friendships. I think they are

afraid, you know, they have heard so much about bullying in social media, from older

siblings…"

Principal E2 then interjected:

They are afraid that they are going from one of thirty in a classroom to one of three-

hundred and that they are going to get lost, they are going to get bullied. They are really

worried that they are not going to have…relationships are different with four or five

teachers than with one.

Principal M2 added:

I would like to throw in that there are parents on that same level. "My child is going to

get lost or stuffed into a locker. We heard this happened last year." Those are some of the

myths that come along with the middle school.

This declaration was met with enthusiastic agreement from the other principals in the focus

group.

This response from Principal M2 led to inquiries about fostering parental involvement

with the transition to middle school. Principal M2 responded by stating that "Constant

communication is the big piece." When pressed for specific strategies for fostering effective

communication with parents, Principal M3 said:

Well…we try. It all starts with the teachers. Ensuring that they understand…they have to

think of parents. We have their most important commodity. We have to understand the

emotional piece, the compassionate piece. They don't care that they are one of three-

hundred. It's their child. We have so much technology that teachers want to shoot off an email and they forget how much more important a voice to voice communication is.

These comments about compassion led to a question about possible strategies for building a community of care for students. Principal M1 stated that he stressed consistency with his teachers. He claimed that discipline was consistent and that violations for rules infractions were applied equally across the student population. Principal M3 added that, "There is not as much tolerance for bad behavior in the middle school. I think sometimes it's quite a shock for some parents." When pressed about whether parents were shocked at the behavior or the consequence, all three middle school principals responded simultaneously that they believed that both the behavior and the consequence attributed to parent responses.

A follow-up question about preparation of student behavior led to Principal E1 suggesting:

I think it can go either way. You know, at elementary school we have some of the same expectations for behavior as the middle school. You know, you can't put your hands on anybody rule, but, I have 115 fifth-graders, it looks different. I think it is handled differently at elementary school, simply because I don't have three-hundred kids with more freedom. It is easier for me to involve a counselor in mediation. A teacher only has 30 kids. It is much easier to head things off before they get out of hand.

Principal M3 concluded that this behavior takes on a different purpose in middle school by stating that, "In middle school, kids are jockeying for position. In elementary school, maybe it was just playing around and being silly, but it gets serious in sixth grade. Finding your place." The focus group interview concluded with a question about additional transition supports that they would like to receive from the district. Principal M2 declared:

> I would like to see more in the way of emotional supports for students. You know, you mentioned giving teachers information about adolescents and how they grow, how they change. I think the kids…they need to hear that, too. They need those lessons, too; before they get to middle school. More of a concerted effort between fifth and sixth-grade counselors to let them know, "OK, you're ten, you are about to become eleven. These are some things that are going to start happening to you. To your body, your mind."

Principal E2 interrupted to say they do present students with that information, but not until late in the school year. Principal M2 argued that information about adolescent changes should be presented much earlier and as an ongoing process throughout fifth grade. This statement was met with consensus from all of the participants of the focus group.

Small-Scale Proof of Concept Findings

Results from the small-scale proof of concept were gathered during Phase Four of collection. Two middle schools, designated School A and School B, implemented three transition strategies to determine what, if any, effect these activities would have on student responses to the Likert-scale questionnaire. With a few exceptions, little change was noted in the percentage of positive responses between the district-wide survey and the results at each of the individual schools that implemented the small-scale proof-of-concept strategies.

When examining prompts related to academic engagement, there was an increase of 5.3% of students at School B reporting that they felt challenged at school (see Table 22). As illustrated in Table 22, there was a significant increase in the number of students at School A who reported being able to receive academic assistance from their teachers when compared to district-wide responses. While 27.5% of students across the district selected "Strongly Agree" in response to

Table 22

Student Questionnaire Responses to Prompts about Academic Engagement Comparing District-

Wide Phase Four Survey Responses with Two Schools that Implemented Three Transition

Strategies as a Small-Scale Proof-of-Concept

Question	Phase	1	2	3	% 4	5	6	7
I feel challenged at school	P4	18.4	30.0	30.4	8.2	4.3	5.8	2.9
	P4A	17.7	41.2	17.7	0.0	0.0	11.8	11.8
	P4B	37.0	33.3	14.8	7.4	3.7	3.7	0.0
The work I do in school	P4	18.4	31.4	31.4	9.7	3.9	3.4	1.9
helps we when I am not in	P4A	17.7	41.2	17.7	0.0	0.0	11.8	11.8
school	P4B	25.9	14.8	40.7	3.7	7.4	7.4	0.0
Good grades are important	P4	85.0	11.6	2.4	0.5	0.5	0.0	0.0
to me	P4A	82.4	11.8	0.0	0.0	5.9	0.0	0.0
	P4B	88.9	3.7	3.7	3.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
I get bored at school	P4	2.5	10.1	16	21.8	38.3	9.3	1.9
	P4A	5.9	11.8	17.7	17.7	23.5	11.8	11.8
	P4B	3.7	20.1	18.5	18.5	29.6	3.7	5.8
It is hard for me to get all of	P4	0.4	1.4	3.2	9.7	15.8	38	31.5
my homework done	P4A	0.0	0.0	23.5	35.3	17.7	17.7	5.9
	P4B	3.7	3.7	25.9	7.4	29.6	22.2	7.4

Note. 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 5 = Somewhat Disagree, 6 = Disagree, 7 = Strongly Disagree. P4 = District Phase Four Responses, P4A = Phase Four School A Responses, P4B = Phase 4 School B Responses. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants that selected that response.

this prompt, 64.7% of students from School A selected "Strongly Agree". When considering school engagement, a higher percentage of students at School B reported a greater overall satisfaction with their school (see Table 23). Across the district 18.4% of students responded that they "Strongly Agree" to the prompt "I would recommend my school to someone moving to my town". By comparison, 48.2% of students from School B selected "Strongly Agree" when responding to this prompt. Finally, when responding to prompts about self-perceptions, students at both School A and School B reported closer connections with their peers than students across the district (see Table 24). When presented with the prompt, "I have friends that I can trust to help me with my problems", 39.6% of students district-wide selected "Strongly Agree" when providing a response. At School A, 52.9% of students responded that they "Strongly Agree" with this statement while 66.7% of students at School B provided a response of "Strongly Agree" to this prompt (see Table 25).

Significance of Findings

Significance District Level Assessment Data Findings

As evidenced in the literature, it is common for students who enter the middle grades to experience declines in academic proficiency (Alspaugh, 1998; Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Eccles et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2014; McGill et al., 2012; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). This was certainly true of mathematics proficiency in this district and across the state. While a 17.1% decrease in the percentage of students deemed proficient in mathematics in 2014-2015 skewed the three-year average lower, the two subsequent years indicated an average 10.1% decrease in the percentage of students who transitioned to middle school and were determined to be grade-level proficient which was a significantly larger decrease than the state average during that same period of time.

108

Table 23

Student Questionnaire Responses to Prompts about Student-Teacher Relationships Comparing

District-Wide Phase Four Survey Responses with Two Schools that Implemented Three

Transition Strategies as a Small-Scale Proof-of-Concept

Question	Phase	1	2	3	% 4	5	6	7
I like my teachers	P4	47.3	36.7	6.8	3.4	2.9	1.9	1.0
	P4A	47.1	29.4	0.0	11.8	5.9	0	5.9
	P4B	29.6	37.0	11.1	7.4	3.7	7.4	3.7
I can trust my teachers to	P4	26.6	23.7	23.2	11.6	5.3	4.8	4.8
help me with problems	P4A	29.4	5.9	29.4	29.4	0.0	5.9	0.0
besides schoolwork	P4B	18.5	18.5	18.5	22.2	11.1	0.0	11.1
My teachers care about me	P4	35.7	39.6	12.6	5.3	2.4	2.4	1.9
	P4A	29.4	23.5	29.4	11.8	5.9	0.0	0.0
	P4B	33.3	25.9	18.5	7.4	14.8	0.0	0.0
I can get help from my	P4	27.5	37.2	22.2	5.8	0.5	3.4	3.4
teachers on my schoolwork	P4A	64.7	17.7	11.8	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
when I need it	P4B	18.5	40.7	18.5	14.8	3.7	3.7	0.0
My teachers listen to me	P4	42.5	30.9	16.9	3.4	3.4	1.0	1.9
	P4A	29.7	47.1	17.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.9
	P4B	11.1	29.6	37.0	7.4	0.0	3.7	11.1

Note. 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 5 = Somewhat Disagree, 6 = Disagree, 7 = Strongly Disagree. P4 = District Phase Four Responses, P4A = Phase Four School A Responses, P4B = Phase 4 School B Responses. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants that selected that response.

Table 24

Student Questionnaire Responses to Prompts about School Engagement Comparing District-

Wide Phase Four Survey Responses with Two Schools that Implemented Three Transition

Strategies as a Small-Scale Proof-of-Concept

Question	Phase	1	2	3	% 4	5	6	7
School is important to me	P4	42.5	32.4	13.0	7.2	2.9	0.0	1.9
	P4A	58.8	17.7	5.9	5.9	11.8	0.0	0.0
	P4B	48.2	25.9	7.4	7.4	7.4	3.7	0.0
I would recommend my school to someone moving to my town	P4	18.4	18.8	25.1	14.0	8.7	7.2	7.7
	P4A	29.4	23.5	17.7	11.8	11.8	0.0	5.9
	P4B	48.2	29.6	11.1	7.4	3.7	0.0	0.0
Students at my school treat each other well	P4	15.5	25.2	28.2	9.7	9.7	5.8	5.8
	P4A	5.9	5.9	23.5	17.7	11.8	17.7	17.7
	P4B	11.1	11.1	22.2	14.8	7.4	14.8	18.5
The rules at my school are fair	P4	22.7	31.9	21.3	7.7	6.8	4.8	4.8
	P4A	17.7	23.5	35.3	5.9	0.0	0.0	17.7
	P4B	14.8	33.3	22.2	3.7	11.1	11.1	3.7
I feel safe at school	P4	35.3	34.8	15.0	6.8	2.9	2.4	2.9
	P4A	23.5	35.3	29.4	0.0	11.8	0.0	0.0
	P4B	18.5	37.0	11.1	11.1	14.8	0.0	7.4

Note. 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 5 = Somewhat Disagree, 6 = Disagree, 7 = Strongly Disagree. P4 = District Phase Four Responses, P4A = Phase Four School A Responses, P4B = Phase 4 School B Responses. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants that selected that response.

Table 25

Student Questionnaire Responses to Prompts about Self-Perceptions Comparing District-Wide

Phase Four Survey Responses with Two Schools that Implemented Three Transition Strategies as

a Small-Scale Proof-of-Concept

Question	Phase	1	2	3	% 4	5	6	7
I think I am smart	P4	27.1	36.2	16.4	9.7	2.9	2.9	4.8
	P4A	47.1	17.7	17.7	0.0	0.0	17.7	0.0
	P4B	29.6	44.4	3.7	7.4	7.7	0.0	7.4
When I am at school, I feel like I belong	P4	24.2	33.8	18.8	12.6	3.9	3.4	3.9
	P4A	47.1	17.7	0.0	17.7	0.0	5.9	11.8
	P4B	11.1	44.4	29.6	11.1	3.7	0.0	0.0
People at school like me	P4	36.2	25.6	20.3	6.8	3.4	4.8	2.9
	P4A	3.3	17.7	17.7	11.8	5.9	0.0	11.8
	P4B	25.9	40.7	11.1	18.5	3.7	0.0	0.0
I have friends that I can trust to help me with my problems	P4	39.6	27.5	16.9	6.8	2.4	2.9	3.9
	P4A	52.9	5.9	11.8	11.8	5.9	5.9	5.9
	P4B	66.7	14.8	11.1	0.0	3.7	0.0	3.7
I enjoy going to school	P4	26.6	30.5	20.3	12.5	0.8	3.9	5.5
	P4A	17.7	23.5	17.7	11.8	5.9	5.9	17.7
	P4B	29.6	25.9	18.5	18.5	0.0	7.4	0.0

Note. 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 5 = Somewhat Disagree, 6 = Disagree, 7 = Strongly Disagree. P4 = District Phase Four Responses, P4A = Phase Four School A Responses, P4B=Phase 4 School B Responses. Numerical values represent the percentage of participants that selected that response.

Students in this district who transitioned to middle school did not exhibit declines in reading proficiency. The average percentage of students in the district who progressed from grade five to grade six and deemed to be grade-level proficient increased over the three-year period examined for this study. The same was true of students across the state. The increases experienced within the district, however, were considerably less than those demonstrated state-wide. Further, if the 2016-2017 outlier is not considered, district gains in the percentage of students who transitioned to the middle grades and demonstrated grade-level proficiency in reading become much less pronounced, decreasing to an average gain of 1.1%. Regardless of declines or increases in student end of grade assessment performance, students in this district transitioning from grade five to grade six lag behind their peers across the state. This difference in academic performance signifies the need for greater academic supports across the middle school transition as these gaps in learning can be exacerbated as students progress through the remainder of their educational careers (Balfanz, 2009).

Significance of District Level Discipline Data Findings

The increases that are noted in short-term suspensions as grade five cohorts progress to the middle school are supported by the literature. During this stage in their development, adolescents are undergoing momentous physical, social, and emotional changes and development (Arim et al., 2011; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015; World Health Organization, 2016). These changes can lead to impulsive behavior and responses to emotional stimuli can be intense and erratic (National Institute of Mental Health, 2011; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). The increases noted in the suspension rates, particularly with assaults and fighting, can be partially attributed to students' impulsivity. Adolescent students also have a strong desire for peer acceptance (Bellmore, 2011). As part of

student attempts to gain peer acceptance, they also attempt to establish their place in the social hierarchy of the school leading to aggressive behaviors and acts that challenge adult authority such as those identified by school personnel as disrespectful (Farmer et al., 2011). Social pressures can also lead students to engage in more risk-taking behaviors, which could account for short-term suspensions for fighting and for marijuana possession (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995). The principal focus groups also revealed a perceived readiness to impose harsher punishment as they described behaviors possibly deemed "horseplay" in the elementary grades was addressed more frequently as aggressive behavior in the middle grades. Research suggested that students were not prepared for this sudden change in behavioral expectations (Akos, 2004).

The increase in suspensions could also be a function of unrealistic expectations from faculty and staff (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Lorain, 2002; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2015). After students have progressed from elementary to the middle school, school personnel believe that children should suddenly behave in a more mature and consistent manner despite the drastic changes in student development (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Lorain, 2002; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2015). Teachers are often unfamiliar with the changes that students endure during adolescence and how these changes can affect student behavior (Andrews & Bishop, 2012). This idea was further supported during the principal focus groups as they stated that they did not take an active role in assuring that staff are familiar with current research on adolescent development. Having an understanding of adolescent brain development would help staff recognize that adolescents can have sudden and dramatic swings between adult and child-like behavior, often beyond their immediate control (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2015). This lack of understanding

113

could be a cause of the increases in short-term suspensions for subjective behaviors such as disrespectful or disruptive behaviors noted in this district.

Significance of Student Perspective Findings

The literature suggested that prior to transitioning to middle school, students reported that organizational matters such as the need for information to prepare them for middle school such as navigating a new building, how to find their correct bus, how to open their lockers, and other practical matters was the most important to them (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Bailey et al., 2015; San Antonio et al., 2011). However, students in this district indicated that they were much more focused on academic, rather than organizational concerns. While organizational issues such as movement around the school were important, students in this district listed the increased workload and grades as their primary and secondary stressors, respectively, when considering the transition to middle school.

Student apprehension about academic affairs is to be expected when students transition to middle school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderson et al., 2000). Despite academic matters being the most prevalent concerns for students, however, it appears that they do not feel that they are able to access the supports they believe they require to be successful in middle school. There was a significant disparity in student responses regarding available academic assistance as 42.5% students fifth-grade students felt strongly that they could get assistance from their teachers, while only 27.5% of sixth-grade students expressed the same sentiment. This demonstrated a need for additional academic supports for students following the transition to middle school.

Students also indicated a loss in the strength of student and teacher relationships. Although students in both grade five and grade six indicated generally positive feelings about the relationship they had with their teachers, significant differences were noted in the strength of

those perceptions. Although student responses indicated that students like their teachers, 61.1% of fifth grade students felt strongly about this relationship as compared to only 47.3% of sixth graders who felt the same strong connection with their teachers. Additionally, 52.1% of fifth-grade students had a strong sense that their teachers cared about them. The percentage of sixth-grade students who reported that they felt this same level of care declined to 35.7%. Unfortunately, this loss of a strong bond between middle grades students and their teachers is well-represented in the literature. The middle school concept can make fostering and maintaining meaningful teacher and student relationships a difficult proposition (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Mac Iver, 1990; Ryan et al., 2013; Vollet et al., 2017). This lack of close bonds with teachers, which were more common in the elementary school, is often perceived by students as a decrease in teacher support and could account for the lack of perceived academic support noted above (Schoffner & Williamson, 2000). This finding is significant as Wang and Holcombe (2010) noted that students who had meaningful relationships with their teachers reported a stronger sense of teacher support and were more likely to adhere to behavioral and academic expectations.

The transition to middle school is often met with decreases in academic performance and motivation and these declines are often coupled with losses in self-esteem (Alspaugh, 1998; Kingery et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2013; Schwerdt & West, 2013). This loss of self-esteem was indicated by student survey results. When responding to the prompt, "I think I am smart", 91.4% of grade five students provided positive responses to this prompt during Phase One compared with 79.7% of grade six students. Additionally, 39.6% of grade five students strongly agreed with this statement while only 27.1% expressed strong agreement. This decline in self-worth,

115

coupled with the high degree of concern for academic matters, further complicates the middle school transition for students in this district.

Significance of Parent Perspective Findings

Parents were most concerned about the quality of parent-teacher relationships when considering the middle school transition. This is a common lament of parents as noted in the literature. Parents have reported that the structure of the middle school is prohibitive to the fostering of effective relationship with teachers as there is no single teacher that is the primary source of support for students and parents (Pickhardt, 2011; Ryan et al., 2013). With parent apprehension about the relationship between the school and the home, it is important that a comprehensive middle school transition plan contains mechanisms for fostering effective home-school relationships. This partnership is crucial as effective partnerships between the school and the home are predictive of greater academic performance and fewer incidents of negative behaviors (Daniel, 2011; Hoang, 2010; Hill et al., 2018; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Laird et al., 2003; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Toren, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, Sustainability Series, 2009).

Fortunately, it appears that the foundations have been laid for more effective parent involvement at the elementary and middle school level. Eighty percent of elementary school parents felt there were opportunities for parents to be involved in their school. This jumped to 94.3% after their children progressed to middle school. Furthermore, 82.7% of middle school parents believed that there was effective communication between the school and home compared to 73.4% of elementary school parents. Survey data does demonstrate, however, that district middle schools need to take a more active role in promoting parent involvement. While a high percentage of middle school parents believed there were greater opportunities to be involved at

school, only 28.5% claimed to have been invited to visit a classroom, compared to 59.9% of parents with children in elementary school.

Significance of Teacher Perspective Findings

In order to facilitate a successful transition for students from elementary school to the middle grades, it is essential that educators comprehend student perceptions about this transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Galton & Morrison, 2000; Koppang, 2004; Yoon et al., 2015). Arrowsafe and Irvin (1992) and Akos and Galassi (2004) found that what educators believe about how students feel concerning the transition to middle school is often quite different from what the students actually believe. This discrepancy in viewpoints certainly proved true in this district.

Grade five teachers perceived that students were most concerned about possible bullying with 28.6% of teachers choosing this as what they believed to be their students' primary apprehension about the transition to middle school. Bullying, however, was listed as the most significant concern by only 18.3% of students, which ranked third out of five. Grade six teachers demonstrated this same misunderstanding of student worries about the transition to middle school. Forty percent of teachers believed that social matters such as friendships were the greatest concern to incoming sixth grade students. The exact opposite was true. Only 7.6% of students chose friendships as their greatest stressor when considering the transition to middle school, ranking it last on their list of five concerns.

This incongruity also holds true when considering students' perceived benefits of the transition to middle school. Both fifth and sixth-grade teachers indicated that they believed that increased independence was the most appealing aspect of transitioning from elementary school to middle grades with 38.1% and 40%, respectively, ranking this choice first. While

117

independence was not unimportant to students, they listed friendships as the most important benefit with 26.6% ranking this choice first.

The lack of a cohesive strategy to mitigate stressors and enhance opportunities for students during the transition to middle school was evident in teacher responses to open-ended prompts. A total of 31 teachers provided feedback about district initiatives and 23 of those teachers identified a visit to the appropriate middle school as the only district-organized transition activity. Teachers also expressed a lack of articulation between the elementary and the middle schools. When asked for suggestions for post-transition activities, one elementary-level teacher lamented, "I am unsure because I don't know what happens at the middle school after they arrive." This lack of understanding of the transition process clearly identified the need for the vertical articulation provided by transition teams as described in the literature (Anderson et al., 2000; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Fields, 2002; Hill & Mobley, 2016).

Strong support through the transition to the middle grades is essential to student success (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Andrews, 2011; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Balfanz, 2009; Kieffer et al., 2014; Tilleczek et al., 2007). Part of this support is understanding the significant educational, emotional, physical, and psychosocial stresses a student is subjected to during the transition from elementary to middle school (Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Lorain, 2002; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). There appeared to be a lack of understanding of adolescent development and the transition process. As one fifth-grade teacher noted, "If the teachers and faculty are competent, the students should adjust easily." A grade six teacher remarked that students needed to learn to "deal with their emotions." This disconnect with student experiences demonstrated the necessity that a

118

comprehensive middle school transition plan includes an adult education component that would assist educators in better understanding the changing adolescent.

Significance of Principal Perception Findings

The responses provided during principal focus group demonstrated the need for district-level assistance in the formation of a comprehensive middle school transition plan. Principals did indicate, however, that they valued the autonomy to create transition activities that they believed best fit their school communities. The principals denoted that there has been very little effective articulation between the middle school and the elementary schools, with one principal going so far as to say he actively avoids this type of professional dialogue. Articulation between teachers, counselors, and administrators at both the elementary school and the middle school is an integral component of a comprehensive middle school transition plan (Anderson et al., 2000; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Fields, 2002; Hill & Mobley, 2016). The logic used to support this philosophy demonstrates this principal's unfortunate lack of understanding of the transition process which could have a negative impact on students at his middle school.

The principals also illustrated the need for support in providing current research on adolescent development as part of a middle grades transition plan. While one principal rightly suggested the importance of providing this information to students, it is essential that school personnel are intimately familiar with this knowledge as well (Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Lorain, 2002; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). During the interview process, the principals admitted they were not actively providing their staff with this body of research. Without this information, it could be difficult for educators to engage in pedagogical practices that are developmentally appropriate for students. Such practices enhance

students' chances at academic success and motivation (Eccles et al., 1993; Ryan et al., 2013; San Antonio et al., 2011; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). The principals that were interviewed could not describe any concrete examples of ensuring that lessons were developmentally appropriate for middle grades students. Fortunately, the principals in this focus group indicated an eagerness to receive assistance from the district in addressing the transition from elementary school to middle school.

Significance of Small-Scale Proof of Concept Findings

It was difficult to assess the efficacy of the transition activities employed through the small-scale proof of concept. There were few significant differences in many of the student survey responses. Changes in student responses were noted at School A regarding academic assistance, but the activities that were utilized at each school were designed to affect organizational concerns and were not focused on the academic theme. Students at School B recorded an overall greater sense of satisfaction in their school, but this change was not noted at School A, making it difficult to identify a correlation between the increase in student satisfaction with the recommended transition activities. It was noted, however, that students at both School A and School B described stronger associations with their peers than students across the district, possibly indicating a positive effect related to the transition activities.

Principals at School A and School B indicated parents and students were provided with the literature regarding the transition to middle school, but they could not say with certainty that teachers reviewed this information with their students as intended. The informational sessions that were provided in concert with Open House activities were sparsely attended despite appropriate levels of promotion. The principals described the utilization of student ambassadors as an effective strategy that they would adopt for future use.

120

The data collected from students, parents, teachers, and administrators indicate that there are students in this district that are not finding success in the transition from elementary school to middle school. There are clearly disconnects between the perceptions of stakeholders and their actual needs. A comprehensive middle school transition plan is necessary so that students will be less likely to exhibit the loss in achievement and engagement that the data indicates.

CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

Review of Study Questions

This Problem of Practice dissertation began by positing three study questions. The first of these questions was, what are the primary foci of stakeholders in this district as students make the transition from elementary school to middle school? Data was collected from fifth grade students and then again from the same group of students after they transitioned to the middle grades. Parents of fifth-grade students were surveyed and then queried again after their children progressed to grade six. Both fifth and sixth-grade teachers were questioned about the middle grades transition, and a group of elementary and middle school administrators provided their feedback about the transition to middle school.

Fifth-grade students were very concerned about academic matters as how the difficulty or amount of work they expected in middle school would affect their grades. Students also expressed apprehensions about bullying, organizational matters such as getting lost in their new school, and maintaining or fostering new friendships. The students saw the opportunity to foster new friendships as the most beneficial aspect of the transition to middle school. Students also cited greater independence as an appealing aspect of moving to the middle grades. Additionally, students looked forward to being able to engage in a greater variety of extracurricular activities, the opportunity for new experiences and personal growth.

After transitioning to middle school, grade six students began to exhibit declines in the quality of student-teacher relationships. They perceived that they were less likely to receive academic supports even though this was their greatest stressor. Students reported a decrease in school engagement and an ambivalence towards their school community, but also expressed a strengthening in peer acceptance and meaningful peer relationships.

Parents of fifth-grade students expressed apprehension about the degradation of parent-teacher relationships after their children progressed to the middle grades. They were worried that their children would be subjected to middle school bullies, the social pressures that their children might endure, and an anticipated increase in the academic workload. Parents were excited that their students would have an opportunity to engage in extracurricular activities and that their children were taking another step towards maturity.

After their children had progressed to middle school, parents professed to having a disconnect from their child's classroom activities as they admitted to not knowing if the work students did was relevant beyond the schoolhouse doors. Parents believed that there were more opportunities to become involved at their child's school in the middle grades, but felt that they had not been invited to participate in classroom activities despite claiming more than adequate communication between the school and home.

Teacher viewpoints about the transition to middle school were not reflective of their students' opinions. Teachers believed that social concerns such as bullying and maintaining or building friendships would be the primary stressors for students transitioning to middle school rather than the academic matters that the students indicated. The teachers believed that students were most looking forward to new-found independence as the greatest benefit of transitioning from elementary school to middle school while students were most excited by the prospect of building new friendships.

District teachers did not indicate that either the district or their respective schools are being proactive in addressing the middle school transition. Teachers were acutely aware of elementary student visits to the middle school that included guided tours and performances by the school band or other performing arts ensemble. Some teachers described a "step-up" night

for incoming middle grades students, but few other transition strategies were noted. This was coupled with comments that indicated an acute misunderstanding of the current body of research regarding adolescent development.

School-based administrators believed that they were addressing the middle school transition appropriately. Despite these perceptions, they did not describe any cohesive set of strategies designed to ease students' transition stress. The principals that were interviewed did not depict effective articulation between elementary and middle school staff. They did not identify practices that actively addressed the need for stakeholders to better understand adolescent development, they did not indicate any specific strategies to address effective parent communication, nor did they effectively address how they assured that instructional activities were developmentally appropriate. Fortunately, these administrators admitted the need for additional supports in assisting students with the transition from elementary to middle school, but expressed the desire to retain control over any transition activities that were undertaken at their schools.

The second research question posed by this Problem of Practice dissertation asked how the body of research could be utilized to effectively address those concerns. As described in Chapter 2 of this study, there is a wealth of literature that illustrates the need to support students during the critical transition from elementary school to middle school (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 1998; Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Andrews, 2011; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Balfanz, 2009; Eccles et al., 2006; Kieffer et al., 2014; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; McGill et al., 2012; NMSA, 1982; Schwerdt & West, 2013; Tilleczek et al., 2007).

Beginning with the middle school movement in the 1960s, and in the growing body of literature since, researchers have recognized early adolescents entering the middle grades as a

unique population and identified the transition from elementary school to middle school as one of the most crucial for students' long term success. As districts gravitated towards the middle school model and away from the junior high concept, the catalogue of effective middle school transition strategies documented in the literature expanded and are readily available for adaption and can be tailored to fit the unique needs of the stakeholders in this, or any, school district.

The final study question was posed to determine how stakeholder feedback and the body of research could be brought together to form the framework of a middle school transition plan in this district. Such a program should be comprehensive in nature should begin prior to the actual transition to middle school and should provide benefits to students, parents, and teachers (Akos, 2004; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Bailey et al., 2015; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Hill & Mobley, 2016; Koppang, 2004; Lorain, 2002). The framework for a comprehensive middle grades transition program that follows was based on feedback from middle grades stakeholders and derived from effective practices and the needs of adolescents as described in the literature.

The components that comprise the framework of this comprehensive middle grades transition plan describe key actions that are mandatory elements of the plan. Recommended, research-based activities are provided to assist schools in addressing the required components. While the framework of this transition plan contains key elements that must be addressed, the independence that school administrators felt was critical to focusing on the needs of their stakeholders must be valued and respected. The recommended activities allow administrators the autonomy to tailor transition programs to the unique needs of their school communities.

Those recommended activities described as occurring prior to the transition to middle school are designed to take place during the final semester of students' fifth-grade year. Those
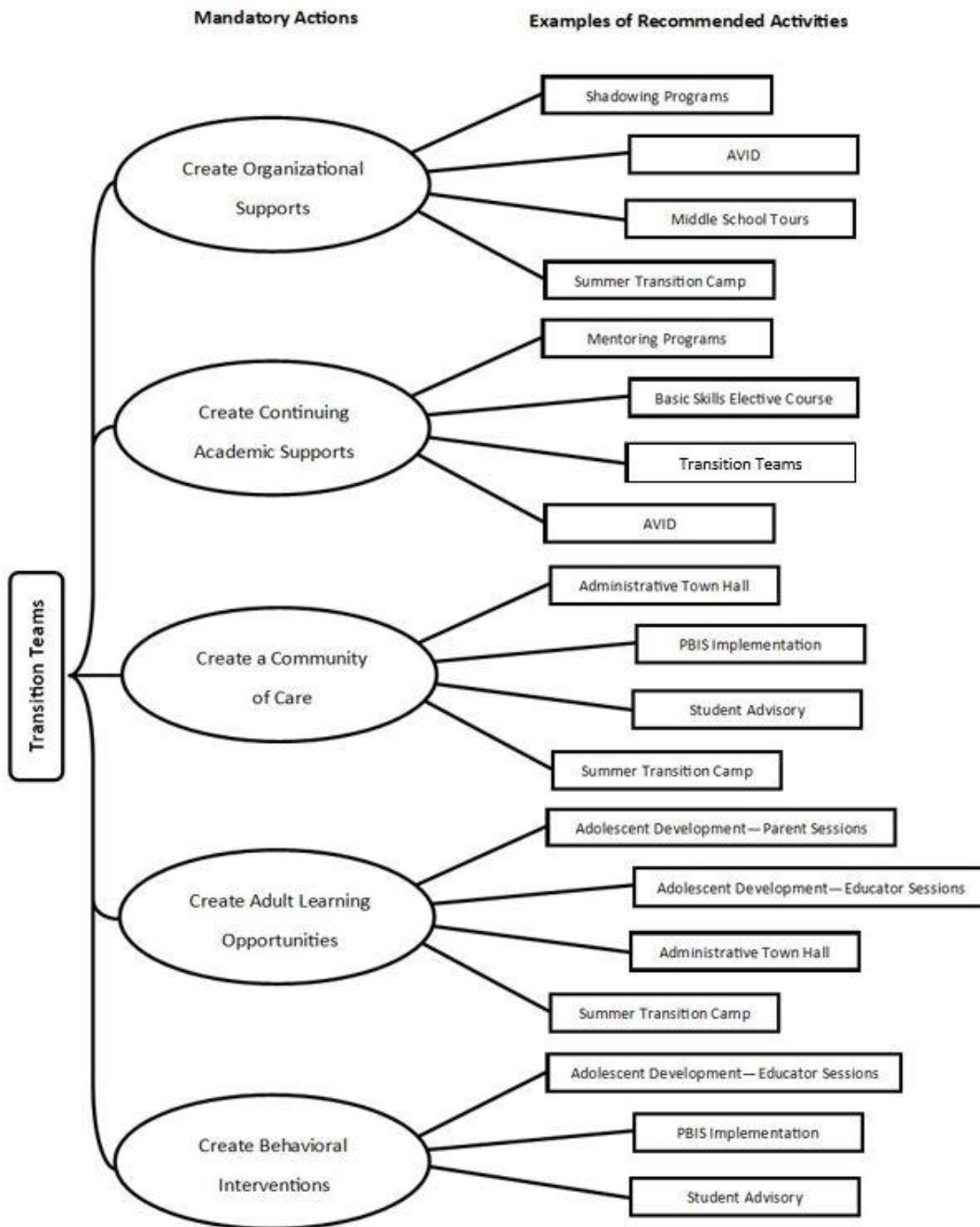
activities designated as occurring during the transition should occur between conclusion of fifth grade and prior to the beginning of sixth grade. Activities occurring after the transition should be undertaken after the beginning of the sixth-grade school year. It is important to note, however, that the transition to middle school is not a singular event, but rather an ongoing process (Allen, 2001; Koppang, 2004). Many of the suggested activities embedded within each mandatory action begin in elementary school and should continue as students progress through grade six.

Mandatory Actions

There are certain key actions that schools must take to facilitate students' successful transition from elementary school to middle school. These actions are based on needs described in the body of research as well as feedback from stakeholders affected by this transition. While there are recommended activities within the required elements that allow for flexibility at each middle school site, the incorporation of the mandatory actions is critical to the success of a comprehensive middle school transition plan in this district (see Figure 2).

Create Organizational Supports

Research indicated that prior to the move to grade six, students are often preoccupied with the organizational aspects of the transition such as movement around the building or the use of school lockers (Bailey et al., 2015; San Antonio et al., 2011). Students are keenly aware of the procedural changes that await them at the middle school, and this new and unfamiliar learning environment is a source of apprehension for rising sixth-grade students (Akos, 2004; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Lorain, 2002; San Antonio et al., 2011). Students are also subject to rumor and misinformation that only exacerbates this stress (Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Lorain, 2002). Properly preparing students for middle school structure and expectations helps to alleviate this stress and leads to more positive outcomes for students (Akos, 2004). As organizational concerns

126

Mandatory Actions

Examples of Recommended Activities

- Create Organizational Supports
  - Shadowing Programs
  - AVID
  - Middle School Tours
  - Summer Transition Camp
- Create Continuing Academic Supports
  - Mentoring Programs
  - Basic Skills Elective Course
  - Transition Teams
  - AVID
- Create a Community of Care
  - Administrative Town Hall
  - PBIS Implementation
  - Student Advisory
  - Summer Transition Camp
- Create Adult Learning Opportunities
  - Adolescent Development—Parent Sessions
  - Adolescent Development—Educator Sessions
  - Administrative Town Hall
  - Summer Transition Camp
- Create Behavioral Interventions
  - Adolescent Development—Educator Sessions
  - PBIS Implementation
  - Student Advisory

Transition Teams

Note. This figure presents the mandatory actions that comprise the framework of this transition plan. The mandatory actions are presented with examples of associated recommended activities as described in the text. Transition teams are not required, but strongly recommended as they can inform planning for the mandatory actions.

Figure 2. Transition Plan Framework.

are a primary stressor for students as noted in the literature, addressing them is an essential

component of a comprehensive middle grades transition plan. Suggested activities include

middle school tours, fifth-grade shadowing opportunities, sixth-grade elementary school visits.

Create Continuing Academic Supports

Elementary school students often profess some amount of concern for their academic

success after they transition to middle school (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Delphi survey data

indicated that academic matters were the primary concerns of students in this district when

considering the transition to middle school. Unfortunately, state assessment data demonstrates

that, despite these concerns, students may not be getting the supports that they require (Public

Schools of North Carolina, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017a). As this is the greatest worry for rising

middle school students, it is imperative that elementary and middle schools make a concerted

effort to address these concerns. While middle grades mentoring programs and courses that

enhance basic skills can be effective strategies to address gaps in academic performance,

elementary and middle school transition teams are an important component of this plan. These

teams would identify at-risk students prior to the transition, provide continuing support after the

transition, and prescribe assistance with students struggling with the transition to middle school.

Transition teams would also address the lack of articulation between elementary and middle

schools described by teachers and administrators in this district. The structure and function of

transition teams is described further in Chapter Five.

Create a Community of Care

The literature described a decline in the quality of the parent/teacher and student/teacher

relationships after the transition to the middle grades (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Akos &

Galassi, 2004; Crosnoe, 2001; Hill et al., 2018; Toren, 2013; U.S. Department of Education

Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, 2008). This was also evidenced through stakeholder feedback. Survey data illustrated that parents of rising middle school students were most concerned about the decline in the student and teacher relationship. Unfortunately, this fear was realized in this district as student survey data demonstrated a marked decline in the perceived strength of student and teacher relationships. Providing students with a caring school community strengthens relationships with teachers and other school personnel, fosters more effective communication between the school and the home and assists, in identifying at-risk behavior in students (Anderson et al., 2000). The community of care also addresses academic concerns as students who develop meaningful relationships with their teachers are more likely to succeed academically (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). To begin fostering meaningful relationships between students and teachers, schools can host activities such summer camps between fifth and sixth-grade. These camps should address organizational concerns as well as provide informal time for teachers and students to socialize and strengthen relational bonds (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Koppang, 2004). Another recommended strategy is the implementation of an effective student advisory program. Appropriately implemented student advisories contributes to the formation of close bonds between teachers and their students, provides parents with a single teacher who serves as a communication bridge between the school and home, and allow teachers to build a community of care (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Mac Iver, 1990; Pickhardt, 2011; Ryan et al., 2013).

Create Adult Learning Opportunities

The middle school movement was founded on the idea that on the idea that middle school students required greater attention and understanding than educators were providing at the time (Schaefer et al., 2016). Understanding middle school students includes being familiar with

129

current research on adolescent physical, emotional, and psychosocial development and applying that research in school practices and procedures (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Beland, 2014; Koppang, 2004; Lorain, 2002; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.; Steinberg, 2015). Neither the elementary schools, middle schools, nor central services in this district are taking an active role in providing staff with professional education focused on adolescent development. Without this knowledge, middle school principals could not describe how they determined that instructional activities presented to students were developmentally appropriate. Misconceptions about adolescent development has led to a lack of understanding between middle grades teachers and students. This was illustrated by the differences in the Delphi survey data in which teachers identified friendships as the most concerning element of the middle grades transition for students, when students actually presented friendships as the least concerning aspect of the transition to middle school and was, in fact, the greatest perceived benefit. To remedy these disconnects, schools could provide teachers with professional learning opportunities about adolescent development (Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Lorain, 2002; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). These lessons should also be provided to parents, as survey data indicated that they believed middle school was an exciting "next step" in their child's life. Presenting this information to parents would help them to comprehend the adolescent changes to expect and how to appropriately react to them (McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015).

Create Behavioral Interventions

District data indicated a dramatic increase in the number of short-term suspensions assigned as a result of undesirable student behavior and an increase in the length of those suspensions after students transition from grade five to grade six. As part of any comprehensive

middle grades transition plan, schools must address this trend (Akos, 2002). Out-of-school suspensions are not an effective means of correcting student misbehaviors (Green, Maynard, & Stegenga, 2018). Students who are assigned exclusionary discipline as a consequence for violations of school rules are more likely to be suspended again (Green et al., 2018). Additionally, students suspended out-of-school are more likely to experience academic difficulties and are more likely to become disengaged with the school community (Green et al., 2018).

Effectively teaching students behavioral expectations prior to the transition to middle school is one recommended strategy to address the increase in short term suspensions and may partially address the increase in behaviors resulting in suspension (Akos, 2002; 2004). There also needs to be a systematic approach to reducing suspensions that includes altering the behavior of not only the students, but teachers and administrators as well. For example, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) represents a research-based, holistic approach to student achievement that provides supports for student learning, teaching practices, and behavioral interventions that address all facets of student success (Evanovich & Scott, 2016; OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2017). A support program such as PBIS must be implemented as a contribute to overall student achievement and has been shown to reduce the need for student suspensions (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2017).

Suggested Activities Prior to the Transition to Middle School

Transition Teams

Feedback from teachers and administrators in this district demonstrated the need for the use of transition teams to facilitate vertical articulation between schools. School administrators

131

freely admitted this lack of communication. Perhaps the most telling need for transition teams was the feedback of a fifth-grade teachers who confessed to not knowing what activities took place after the students progressed to middle school. These transition teams should consist of administrators, counselors, and teachers from the middle school and the feeder elementary school (Anderson et al., 2000; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Fields, 2002; Hill & Mobley, 2016). These teams should meet to discuss the needs of rising sixth grade students and to collaborate to devise strategies for providing appropriate assistance to those students identified as academically or socially at-risk as well as strategies to address students who may need enhancements in the educational programs (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Fields, 2002; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Wormeli, 2011).

To facilitate discussions during transition team meetings, fifth grade teachers should provide pertinent information about each of their students to the feeder middle school. This one-page form is designed to be completed without requiring an excessive amount of time from fifth-grade teachers to complete, but still providing the middle school with an appropriate level of detail to begin to develop plans to meet the needs of incoming students, especially learners with exceptional needs.

Transition teams should articulate strategies that could be utilized to better prepare students for the middle grades. Sixth-grade teachers in this district professed the need for students entering middle school to be well-versed in strategies to keep themselves organized, to be more efficient at time management, and to have a foundation in appropriate study skills. Transition team meetings would provide teachers the opportunity to devise strategies that elementary school teachers could implement that would assist fifth-grade students master the

skills that middle school teachers identified as essential for student success (Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.). Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) recommended that middle school members of the transition teams should continue to meet after the transition to identify students who were having difficulty navigating the transition to the middle grades and to devise strategies to address the needs of those students.

As suggested by the Georgia Department of Education (2015), transition teams should assume a leadership role in planning for the transition from elementary school to middle school. The Georgia Department of Education recommended that transition teams conduct needs assessments and survey fifth-grade students regarding their apprehensions about transitioning to middle school and then using that information to tailor student-focused transition activities based on student feedback. These teams should meet regularly to evaluate and revise transition plans based on changing student needs.

Middle School Personnel Visit Fifth Grade Classrooms

Middle school teachers and administrators visiting elementary school classrooms is strategy frequently referenced in the literature (California Department of Education, n.d.; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Fields, 2002; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Lorain, 2002; Schoffner & Williamson, 2000; Wormelli, 2011). Fields (2002) reported that too much time was lost at the beginning of the students' sixth-grade year establishing rules and behavioral expectations for students new to the middle school. Middle school administrators, counselors, and teachers should conduct periodic visits to fifth grade classrooms beginning at the midpoint of the fifth-grade academic year. These visits should focus on discussions about practices, procedures, and behavioral norms that students will be expected to adhere to once they transition to the middle grades. This has the added benefit of familiarizing fifth-grade teachers with those expectations

allowing them to gradually adjust their own classroom procedures to model those that the students would expect at the middle school.

Administrative Town Hall Meetings

Allaying the fears of both students and parents about the transition to middle school should be a key component to any transition plan (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Lorain, 2002). Students and parents often have a preexisting negative perspective about the middle school experience (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Lorain, 2002). Middle school administrators can take a lead role in helping to assuage those concerns by hosting meetings that allow parents and students to pose questions to administrators about the middle school experience (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Koppang, 2004; Lorain, 2002). Lorain also recommended that administrators take the opportunity to provide a positive message about the middle school experience and to ensure parents and students that it is a safe and enjoyable environment.

Middle grades administrators could facilitate this process through a series of meetings in a town hall format. These meetings should be hosted on a Saturday or evening at each of the feeder elementary schools to accommodate parent schedules. The meeting should begin with a presentation about the school itself, extolling the positive qualities of the middle school and the new opportunities that await students after the transition to the middle grades. This presentation should them be followed by an open-format question and answer period, allowing parents and students to have their concerns addressed by the presenting administrator.

Sixth Grade Student Classroom Visits

By encouraging interactions with their peers, educators can create an atmosphere in which students feel more comfortable and at ease which may, in turn, be helpful in fostering

more meaningful dialogue about their concerns regarding the transition to middle school (Koppang, 2004). To facilitate these interactions, sixth-grade students should be invited into fifth-grade classrooms to discuss their experiences with the middle school transition (Bailey et al., 2015; Cauley & Jovanovich; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Koppang, 2004; McElroy, 2001). A number of teachers in this district also felt that this would be a compelling strategy in preparing students for the transition to the middle grades.

The sixth-grade students should be selected by their classroom teachers and should work with school counselors to prepare them for the experience (McElroy, 2001). The sixth-grade students should be prepared to deliver a brief student-focused presentation about their school accenting the positive characteristics of the middle school and the opportunities awaiting students once they transition to the middle grades. The sixth-grade classroom visitor should also be ready to answer common questions posed by fifth-grade students. Current student survey information gathered by the school transition team should be used to prepare the visiting students for possible questions.

Fifth Grade Shadowing

The idea of having students interact with their peers to express concerns about middle school and to identify solutions is further addressed in the literature as an effective strategy through student "shadowing" programs (Akos, 2004; Anderson et al., 2000; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Hill & Mobley, 2016; Koppang, 2004; Schoffner & Williamson, 2000). Student shadowing programs entail teacher-selected fifth-grade students spending a day at the middle school paired with a sixth-grade student. The fifth-grade student "shadows" a sixth-grade student in order to experience a typical middle school day. Special opportunities may be arranged so that the fifth-grade student could experience activities such as

scheduling an appointment with a counselor, a visit to the media center to learn check-out procedures, or observing the recording of a student news program. The fifth-grade student would then present to his or her class about their experiences and observations.

School Visit/Tour

Elementary school students visiting and touring the middle school they will attend was a transition strategy that was ubiquitous throughout the literature. Teachers identified school tours as the sole student-focused transition strategy supported by the district. The middle school principals that were interviewed as a part of the focus group for this study were appreciative of the district support, primarily scheduling the visits and arranging for bus transportation, but were also adamant that they enjoyed the autonomy to design programs that they felt best present their school and its unique opportunities. In response to this feedback, the only recommendation is for this practice to continue with district support and organization.

Open House/Step Up Night

A number of teachers who provided feedback to surveys for this study noted that their school hosted a "step-up" night, but they did not provide details regarding the activities that were sponsored during these events. The literature provides a number of strategies to make certain that such events are meaningful for stakeholders based on the feedback that they provided during data collection (Bailey et al., 2015; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.; Koppang, 2004; Lorain, 2002; Schoffner & Williamson, 2000). Attendance should be encouraged through formal invitations sent home by the middle school via the elementary school, phone and text messages encouraging attendance, advertising such events on school and district websites, and working with local businesses to have them promote

attendance on their marquee or other signage (Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.; Wormelli, 2011).

The open house program should start with an assembly where the administrative staff could introduce themselves to parents and students and provide a brief overview of the planned activities (Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.; Koppang, 2004). At the conclusion of the general session, students and parents should be provided with an index card and asked to write down a question or concern that they have about the transition to middles school and they should be collected as the participants exit the general session for use later in the evening (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Schoffner & Williamson, 2000). The general session should be followed by student-led exhibitions positioned throughout the building that provide information on typical academic activities allowing rising sixth-grade students and their parents to move at their own pace and become more familiar with the physical layout of the school building (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Koppang, 2004).

The parents and students of this district indicated that the opportunity to select electives and to participate in extracurricular activities was a primary positive facet of the transition to middle school. Based upon this feedback, student exhibitions should have a strong extracurricular and elective course focus. Elective courses such as world languages, art, and technology-based courses should prepare displays or demonstrations presented by students currently enrolled in those courses (Schoffner & Williamson, 2000). The school band, orchestra and choir should perform at separate times throughout the event, allowing parents and students to attend multiple performances. Cheerleaders, dance teams, step teams, and other performance based-clubs and organizations should present examples of their routines.

Various clubs, teams, organizations, and groups should have tables or displays positioned throughout out the building to provide information to students and parents about how students can join, and even offer preliminary sign-ups during the Open House/Step-Up event. Each club, team, or organization should prepare an informational brochure or pamphlet to distribute to students and parents (Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.).

After a designated time has elapsed, parents and students should be separated for presentations designed specifically for each audience (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Koppang, 2004, Schoffner & Williamson, 2000). School administrators should facilitate the student presentation and sixth-grade teachers and parent representatives should facilitate the parent session (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016).

The presentation directed at rising sixth-grade students should focus on answering questions that students submitted at the end of the first general session. Time should be allowed for any additional questions regarding organizations, clubs, or course demonstrations witnessed during the event. The program for parents should provide sixth-grade teachers the opportunity to begin establishing relationships with parents (Lorain, 2002; Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.). Parents in this district noted that their greatest concern regarding the transition to middle school was the loss of meaningful relationships with teachers. By facilitating a parent-directed presentation, teachers would begin to foster those relationships. Parent representatives should present parents with information about opportunities for parental involvement at the middle school including serving on school leadership committees, parent-teacher organizations, and volunteer opportunities at the school (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Schoffner & Williamson, 2000). Schools in this district have electronic newsletters that are distributed at regular intervals. Parents should be provided the opportunity to sign-up to begin

receiving the middle school newsletter (Wormelli, 2011). The parent session should conclude with a question and answer period facilitated by the sixth-grade teachers based on the questions submitted at the end of the general session.

Principal Welcome Letter at the End of the Year

At the conclusion of fifth-grade, all eligible rising sixth-grade students should receive a letter from the middle school principal as part of the typical year-end processes (Fields, 2002; Schoffner & Williamson, 2000; Wormelli, 2011). The letter should congratulate students on completing elementary school and welcome students to the middle school. It should also contain invitations to summer transition activities. While created by the middle school, distribution of the letter should be facilitated by the elementary school to ensure the letter is only provided to eligible students.

Suggested Activities During the Transition to Middle School

Parent Workshops

Parental involvement in the transition from elementary to middle school is an essential component to any comprehensive transition plan as parents that begin the process as active partners are more likely to stay involved in their child's education at the next school level (Anderson et al., 2000; Mac Iver, 1990). Increased parental involvement is critical to student success as children with parents who are actively involved with their education are more likely to find academic success and less likely to exhibit undesirable behaviors (Daniel, 2011; Hill et al., 2018; Hoang, 2010; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Laird et al., 2003; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Toren, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, Sustainability Series, 2009). It is imperative, therefore, that parents are well-versed in all aspects of the transition to middle school (Allen, 2001). This

familiarity includes understanding students' transition from childhood to adolescence (Koppang, 2004; Lorain, 2002; Steinberg 2011, 2015).

Parent survey data that indicated that they are enthusiastic about their child's growth and maturity. They are very excited about their child taking the "next step" to becoming young adults. It is essential that parents fully understand the changes their child will be going through as they begin to mature physically, emotionally, and psychosocially. To that end, it is recommended that schools provide a series of summer workshops presented by school counselors that are designed to educate parents about adolescent development (Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Lorain, 2002; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.; Steinberg 2011, 2015). Topics for these parent workshops should include information about adolescent physical changes, cognitive development, social and emotional changes, student identity, and sexuality.

The presentation on physical development should include expected physical changes to expect during adolescence, differences in female and male development, concerns about body image and the effects of social media on self-image, obesity and eating disorders, and the importance of proper nutrition and exercise. Information about cognitive development should introduce the anatomy of the brain to assist parents in understanding other topics involving cognitive changes. Those changes include development of abstract thinking, reasoning, and meta-cognition, tips for parents to address these changes, changes in sleep patterns and the cognitive effects of tobacco, drugs, and alcohol. The workshop designed to inform parents about social and emotional changes should include topics such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and fostering appropriate friendships. There should also be a component on recognizing and helping adolescents cope with stress and a component that addresses bullying.

140

The presentation on student identity should prepare parents for an adolescent's growing sense of independence, the need to feel competent, the importance of social status, and the development of a sexual identity. This seminar should also include information surrounding mental health, self-harm, and suicide. The final parent workshop should be designed to inform parents about adolescent sexuality. Topics should include strategies to assist parents to understand healthy sexual development, common adolescent questions and concerns about sexuality, and how to address the risks that are associated with unsafe or too-early sexual activity.

By better understanding the how all of these changes are affecting their children, parents will be better equipped to aid them in successfully navigating the transition into the middle grades. All of the workshops described above should provide parents with relevant, research-based information about the changing adolescent and should be developed by a team of district administrators, counselors, and teachers to provide the most relevant information to district stakeholders. Care should be taken in preparing such lessons and should be sensitive to the cultural differences present in district stakeholders.

Educator Workshops

Teachers need to be acutely aware of the anxieties of students as they transition to middle school and developmental changes that adolescents experience (Lorain, 2002). Andrews and Bishop (2012) stated that educators were not typically well-versed about the developmental needs of adolescents which could lead to increased stress during the transition to middle school. During the interview process, principals in this district admitted that they did not take an active role in providing their staffs with information pertaining to adolescent research. Further, it was clear that the principals themselves were not able to assure that the lessons teachers were providing were compatible with adolescent brain research. To be certain that teachers utilize

141

current research on adolescent development, the parent workshops should also be provided to educators in the district (Koppang, 2004; Lorain, 2002; Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.). To accommodate teacher schedules, these workshops could be delivered as professional development opportunities during the summer or presented in series during teacher workdays prior to the beginning of the school year.

Summer Transition Camp

Summer orientation programs are another frequently cited strategy to ease students' transition stress (Bailey et al., 2015; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Georgia Department of Education, 2015; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Hill & Mobley, 2016; Koppang, 2004; Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.; Schoffner & Williamson, 2000). Such programs allow students to become more familiar with middle school procedures, expectations, and the physical layout of the building without the added pressure of older students or academic demands (Hill & Mobley, 2016; Nelson, Fairchild, Grossenbacher, & Landers, 2007). Unlike other transition strategies, summer orientation programs have special considerations including staffing, supplies, and budgetary concerns. School-based transition teams should meet to consider these factors and to plan orientation activities accordingly (Georgia Department of Education, 2015). It is intended that both parents and students attend the summer camp program. If possible, these half-day camps should be scheduled on a Saturday and offered at least twice to accommodate family schedules.

Ideally, students should already have been assigned a homeroom teacher for the purpose of the summer camps. As relationships with staff were of great concern to parents, having students already assigned to their homeroom teacher would allow for parents and students to begin to forge a meaningful relationship with the teacher primarily responsible for the student

142

during the school year (Koppang, 2004; Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.). Students should engage in brief team building activities in order to begin forming meaningful peer relationships. Parents should have the opportunity to meet with teachers to discuss rules and academic expectations and attend to administrative matters such as filling out forms typical of the beginning of the year and being provided school transportation information (Akos, 2002). The program should also allow for parents to begin networking as forming support groups as recommended by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1995). Students should be provided the opportunity to rehearse procedures such as changing classes and eating in the cafeteria (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016). Available staff should be positioned throughout the building to assist students who have difficulty getting from place to place. The orientation session should end with a celebratory social event (Gilweski & Nunn, 2016).

Early Arrival

As the beginning of the school year approaches, students should be provided the opportunity to "rehearse" their daily schedule without the stress or worry of having older students in the building or being late to class (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Koppang, 2004; Wormelli, 2011). To facilitate this, incoming sixth-grade students should be given the opportunity to begin the school year a half-day before the remainder of the student body (Hill & Mobley, 2016; Nelson et al., 2007).

Students should get their course schedules and rehearse moving from class to class. They would have an opportunity to meet their teachers and begin to work on procedural issues such as organization or classroom rules. Students could receive their school-issued computer and other supplies and eat lunch in the cafeteria as though they would in a typical school day. Through this

strategy, students would be able to begin school with at least a basic concept of what will be expected of them once the school year officially begins. Early arrival programs should follow abbreviated day schedules as determined by appropriate school personnel.

Suggested Activities After the Transition to Middle School

Student Ambassadors

The use of student ambassadors was a strategy enthusiastically embraced by those principals who participated in the small-scale proof of concept trial. This approach utilized older students to assist the new sixth-grade students with organizational matters, especially movement throughout the school campus (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Wormelli, 2011). Wormelli (2011) suggested that student ambassadors wear "Ask Me" buttons so that they could be easily identified by younger students.

Student ambassadors should be selected by teachers and counselors at the end of the prior school year based on criteria determined by school administration. These students would receive training prior to the first day of school stressing friendliness and cooperation and the concerns of rising sixth-grade students. During the first week of school, student ambassadors would position themselves throughout the building just prior to class changes and during lunch periods. Grade six students unsure of where their next class was located or who had lost their new schedules altogether would be able to quickly receive assistance from a student ambassador.

Student Advisory

All of the middle schools in this district have some time allotted in their daily schedules for a homeroom or advisory period. The time dedicated to student advisory varied from a ten-minute homeroom, a full thirty-minute time period, to a non-specific amount of time built directly into a class period. Middle schools need to revisit their schedules and commit to a

meaningful student advisory. A keen sense of school community can provide students with a sense of belonging and ease transition stress and provides parents with a bridge to home-school communications (Anderson et al., 2000; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Mac Iver, 1990).

Having a student advisory creates a community of care within the school that encourages teachers to get to know their students and provides them the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with students that provides the supports they need to successfully transition to middle school (Anderson et al., 2000; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Mac Iver, 1990; Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.). Students who participated in this study demonstrated a notable drop in the number of those who strongly believed that their teachers cared about them once they transitioned to the sixth grade. A successful student advisory allows teachers the chance to build relationships that demonstrate care (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Mac Iver, 1990). Providing this community of care also addresses the greatest concern of district parents; the loss of meaningful student-teacher relationships.

An effective advisory also promotes communication (Mac Iver, 1990). Both parents and teachers are often frustrated by the lack of communication between the school and the home (Hill et al., 2018; Pickhardt, 2011). Parents believe that the sheer number of students that a teacher is responsible for can negatively affect relationships and communication (Toren, 2013). A student advisory period gives middle grades teachers a smaller number of students on which to focus communication efforts. This increased communication allows parents and teachers to form effective partnerships and to recognize social, organization, and academic struggles as they arise and to provide collaborative interventions in a timely fashion (Anderson et al., 2000).

Akos (2002) asserted that students who transition to the middle school still require an elementary approach to rehearsing procedures. These procedures need to be reinforced through practice (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). A student advisory provides students the opportunity to learn organizational expectations and procedures without interfering with time dedicated to academic matters. Students could take this time early in the school year to learn behavioral expectations, review note-taking or study strategies, and other matters that apply across the curriculum. Creating a sense of community also provides students an opportunity to build relationships and the capacity for peer acceptance. A series of activities during student advisories that fosters friendships and strengthens social bonds addresses students' greatest perceived benefit of the transition to middle school.

Administrative Visits to Classroom

Despite the best intentions of any comprehensive transition program, students are bound to discover they are having difficulty or have experienced adversity in ways they had not anticipated. To ease any additional transition stress that these unexpected challenges, school administrators should visit all sixth-grade advisories after the first week of school to discuss any new student concerns regarding the transition to middle school (Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Schoffner & Williamson, 2000). These visits could also serve to begin to identify students who may not be transitioning to middle school successfully and are in need of additional interventions (Anderson et al., 2000).

Academic Supports

The principal concern for students in this district preparing to progress to the middle school was academic in nature. Student indicated that their chief concern in moving to the middle grades was the anticipated amount and difficulty of the work. Their secondary worry was

that their grades would be lower than that to which they had become accustomed. Student feedback, therefore, dictates that there should be supports in place for those students who demonstrate academic shortcomings.

Through the work of transition teams, students with academic deficiencies should be identified prior to the transition to middle school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Association for Middle Level Education, 2002; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Fields, 2002; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016; Wormeli, 2011). Those students determined to be academically at-risk through classroom performance, standardized tests, or some other measure should be scheduled for a course designed to address the need for basic skills enhancements in reading, mathematics, or both. This course would be presented during an elective period by a certified teacher. By limiting this to a single, first semester only course, students would still have the ability to participate in at least one other elective of their choosing, which was an important middle school benefit described by parents. This basic skills enhancement model would not interfere with state-mandated physical education requirements (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2016).

Another strategy to address students who are at-risk academically is for the school to host skills development sessions on Saturdays (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Fields, 2002; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016). Instructors and tutors for these Saturday sessions could include community mentors, teachers, and older, academically proficient students who require volunteer hours to qualify for certain scholarships (Public Schools of North Carolina, n.d.; Wormelli, 2011). After school teacher-directed tutoring is already commonly utilized in this district. Additional strategies for supporting student learning can be found in the *Suggested Policies and Practices* section of this chapter.

Additional Transitional Support

147

Akos (2002) lamented that middle school transition programs often incorrectly assume that once students have entered the middle grades, the transition is complete and students can go about the business of being middle school students. The transition to middle school is an ongoing process that may take many months into a student's sixth-grade year (Arowsafe & Irvin, 1992; Gilweski & Nunn, 2016). Middle grades transition teams can take a lead role in continuing to provide transition supports to students (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). The transition team should meet periodically after the transition to middle school to plan interventions for students who have struggled being successful either academically, socially, or organizationally since transitioning to the middle grades.

Suggested Practices and Policies

Academic and Behavioral Supports

The school district leaders, school-based administrators, and classroom teachers must be keenly aware of the developmental needs of adolescent learners. Educational practices and policies should align with the unique challenges that face adolescents. Through a focus group interview with school administrators in the district, it was discovered they were unable to describe the methods they employed to assure that classroom teachers were engaging middle grades students with developmentally appropriate pedagogical techniques. The sharp increase in short-term suspensions after the transition to middle school and the lack of appropriate academic progress on statewide standardized assessments further illustrates the need for strategies that more appropriately address the needs of our young adolescents.

Survey results indicated that sixth grade teachers believe that students often progress to middle school without appropriate organizational, note-taking, time management, or study skills. Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is an evidence-based program that can

148

provide students access to those skills. One of the core tenets of the AVID program is a focus on organizational skills (Bendall, Bolhoefer, & Koilpillai, 2015). AVID teaches effective note-taking systems, organizing homework and other school information, summarization for comprehension, outcome-based strategies to help students monitor their learning, and many other strategies designed to optimize opportunities for learning (Bendall et al., 2015). All eight middle schools in this district utilize AVID strategies in their instructional programs, but only six of the twenty elementary schools regularly use these techniques. Through district and school leaders encouraging the use of these strategies in fifth-grade classrooms, many of the organizational concerns of sixth-grade teachers could be met and less instructional time would be lost in middle school teaching students these skills.

It has been well-documented that allowing students to practice skills strengthens the developing pathways in their brain (McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). Given this information, it is important that students are provided the opportunity to practice their developing skill sets such as planning, foreseeing and accepting consequences, and self-regulation (McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015). Students have a natural inclination to hone these skills and they do so by demanding more autonomy and as educators, we must respond appropriately by providing students an increasing level of control (Beland, 2014; Caskey & Ruben, 2003; Eccles et al., 1993, Goldstein et al., 2015; McNeely & Blanchard, 2009; Steinberg, 2011, 2015; Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

In an attempt to provide students with more control over their education, teachers should consider the use of student-directed projects and rubrics to assess their performance on those projects (Beland, 2014; California Department of Education, n.d.; Caskey & Ruben, 2003). When provided a choice, intrinsic motivation increases and students learning becomes more

149

important to them for their own reasons (Beland, 2014). Students are able to formulate their own essential questions that require them to plan ahead, carry out that plan, and make predictions, all of which stimulate synaptic growth in their developing brains (Beland, 2014; Steinberg, 2011). Student directed projects allow them to connect their learning to the world around them, giving their learning more significance (Beland, 2014; California Department of Education, n.d.; Caskey & Ruben, 2003).

The use of rubrics is a powerful tool for assessment and feedback (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Rubrics allow educators to assess not just mastery of content, but the process that students used to achieve mastery (California Department of Education, n.d.; Marzano et al., 2001). Student-created rubrics allow students even greater autonomy in demonstrating mastery (Beland, 2014; California Department of Education, n.d.). Such a strategy allows students to choose how they demonstrate mastery of a topic and allows them to transfer their learning to real-world problem-solving (California Department of Education, n.d.). Beland (2014) demonstrated that using strategies that provide greater autonomy and that focus on the process of mastery rather than the mastery of a skill fosters greater school engagement, which, as survey results illustrated, declined in this district after students transitioned to the middle school.

The marked increase in student suspensions may be partially addressed by improved preparation for the middle grades through an effective middle school transition program (Akos, 2002). However, there needs to be a more systematic approach to reducing the instructional time lost to students during short-term suspensions as well as the time lost to teachers and administrators in addressing those behaviors and their after-effects. Exclusionary discipline such as out-of-school suspensions is an ineffective tool for addressing undesirable student behaviors and is often a discriminatory practice (Green et al., 2018). There is a high degree of recidivism

150

regarding out-of-school suspension and this practice is associated with lower academic achievement, student disengagement, and the deterioration of the relationship between the school and the home (Green et al., 2018). This stands in direct conflict with the goals of a comprehensive middle grades transition program.

Students are much more unlikely to engage in undesirable classroom behaviors if they have their basic needs met and have the skills and knowledge to understand information expectations so as to be successful in the classroom (Green et al., 2018). The multi-tiered system of support offered through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support provides students with the opportunity to find that success. PBIS represents an approach to student success that is comprised of practices, systems, and interventions for establishing supports for learning, teaching, and behavior necessary to optimize opportunities for success for all students (Evanovich & Scott, 2016; OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2017).

PBIS offers tiered responses that allow interventions to be tailored specifically to individual student needs (Evanovich & Scott, 2016; OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2017). There is more than adequate evidence that utilizing this approach is effective at creating positive academic and social outcomes for students in need of additional supports to be successful in school (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2017). The preventative practices and interventions prescribed by PBIS has been shown to reduce the need for exclusionary discipline and recidivism (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2017). Unfortunately, only three middle schools in this district are actively training staff and implementing strategies espoused through the PBIS process. Encouraging

administrators to across the district to implement the PBIS philosophy with fidelity would be an important part of any plan to reduce out-of-school suspensions (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2017).

Athletic Participation

Parent survey data indicated that many parents were excited about the opportunity for students to participate in interscholastic sports. Until recently, sixth grade students have been disallowed from participating in interscholastic athletics. In 2017, the North Carolina Board of Education amended this policy to allow sixth-grade students to participate in interscholastic athletics, except for football, but left the decision of allowing participation to the LEA (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2017). This district decided against allowing sixth grade participation. Based on parent survey data, it would be advisable for the LEA to reconsider this decision and allow sixth-grade students to opportunity to participate in interscholastic athletics.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

The middle school transition is a critical juncture in the life of an adolescent. The success of a student during this time is often predictive of future success. A comprehensive plan that minimizes the stress that inevitably occurs during this educational progression is an integral component of the transition to the middle grades. While there are many examples of such plans in the literature, there is no one-size-fits-all program for students. Each community, each school, and each child is different and brings their own perspectives to the transition to middle school. That is why it is essential that the thoughts and feelings of all stakeholders affected by this transition are ingrained into any transition plan. This Problem of Practice dissertation has considered the body or research involving the middle grades, the adolescent learner, and exemplary programs and combined that information with the perspectives of district students,

parents, teachers, and administrators affected by this transition to develop mandatory actions that create the framework of a comprehensive middle school transition plan that addresses the unique needs of the stakeholders of this district.

Additional Considerations

Recommendations

Despite the increased attention on the importance of the middle grades as a result of the middle school movement, teacher and administrator feedback collected during the course of this study demonstrated a lack of understanding of current research on adolescent development and the effects it can have on education. Being well-versed in this information is essential to creating and employing effective educational strategies in middle grade classrooms. While it is incumbent upon middle grades educators to remain abreast of current research and pedagogical practices, data collected during this study indicated that both teachers and principals lack a rudimentary understanding of adolescent development. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that colleges and universities re-examine both teacher and principal preparation programs and identify opportunities to incorporate childhood development, specifically adolescent development, into those programs. Providing teachers and principals with strong foundations in this knowledge would better prepare them for the challenges that come with educating adolescents and give them the information they would need to effectively adjust their educational practices.

Considerations for Future Study

This Problem of Practice dissertation only considered fifth grade students as a single demographic group. There are opportunities for further study by considering other populations that experience the middle grades transition as each of these populations could be affected in different ways. Future research could consider how the transition from elementary to middle

school affects students in different racial or ethnic populations, socioeconomic groups, students with disabilities, different genders, or students who identify as LGBTQ.

REFERENCES

Adams, K. S., & Christenson, S. L. (2000). Trust and the family–school relationship examination

    of parent–teacher differences in elementary and secondary grades. *Journal of School*

    Psychology, 38(5), 477-497. doi: 10.1016/S0022-4405(00)00048-0

Akos, P. (2002). Student perceptions of the transition from elementary to middle

    school. *Professional School Counseling, 5*(5), 339-345. Retrieved from

    www.schoolcounselor.org

Akos, P. (2004) Advice and student agency in the transition to middle school. *Research in*

    Middle Level Education Online, *27*(2), 1-11. doi: 10.1080/19404476.2004.11658169

Akos, P., & Galassi, J. P. (2004). Middle and high school transitions as viewed by students,

    parents, and teachers. *Professional School Counseling, 7*(4), 212-221.

Akos, P., Rose, R. A., & Orthner, D. (2015). Sociodemographic moderators of middle school

    transition effects on academic achievement. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 35*(2), 170-

    198. doi: 10.1177/0272431614529367.

Alexander, W. M. (1963). *The junior high school: A changing view*. Paper presented at the Tenth

    Annual Conference for School Administrators: A National Conference on the Junior

    High School. Nashville, Tennessee. Retrieved from http://www.ncmle.org/docs/

    alexander.pdf

Allen, R. (2001). Passages to learning: Schools find ways to help students make transitions.

    ASCD Education Update, 42(7), 1-7. Retrieved from www.ascd.org

Alspaugh, J. W. (1998). Achievement loss associated with the transition to middle school and

    high school. *The Journal of Educational Research, 92*(1), 20-5. doi:

    10.1080.00220679809597572

Anderman, E. M., & Maehr, M. L. (1994). Motivation and schooling in the middle grades.

    Review of Educational Research, 64(2), 287-309. doi: 10.3102/00346543064002287

Anderson, L. W., Jacobs, J., Schramm, S., & Splittgerber, F. (2000). School transitions:

    Beginning of the end or a new beginning? *International Journal of Educational*

    Research, *33*(4), 325-339. doi:10.1016/s0883-0355(00)00020-3

Andrews, C., & Bishop, P. (2012). Middle grades transition programs around the globe. *Middle*

    School Journal, 44(1), 8-14. doi: 10.1080/00940771.2012.11461834

Andrews, P. G. (2011). Middle grades education policy: From stagecraft to strategy. *Middle*

    School Journal, 43(2), 54-63. doi: 10.1080/00940771.2011.11461804

Arim, R. G., Tramonte, L., Shapka, J. D, Dahinetn, S. V., & Willms, J. D. (2011). The family

    antecedents and the subsequent outcomes of early puberty. *Journal of Youth and*

    Adolescence, 40(11), 1423-1425. doi: 10.1007/s10964-011-9638-6

Arowosafe, D. S., & Irvin, J. L. (1992). Transition to a middle level school: What kids say.

    Middle School Journal, 24(2), 15-19. doi: 10.1080/00940771.1992.11495162

Association for Middle Level Education. (2002). *Supporting students in their transition to*

    middle school: A positon paper jointly adopted by National Middle School Association

    and the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Retrieved from

    http://www.nppsd.org/vimages/shared/vnews/stories/525d81ba96ee9/Tr%20-

    %20Supporting%20Students%20in%20Their%20Transition%20to%20Middle%20Schoo

    l.pdf

Bailey, G., Giles, R. M., & Rogers, S. E. (2015). An investigation of the concerns of fifth graders

    transitioning to middle school. *RMLE Online, 38*(5), 1-12. doi:

    10.1080/19404476.2015.11462118

Balfanz, R. (2009, June). *Putting middle grades students on the graduation path: A policy and practice brief.* National Middle School Association. Retrieved from https://www.amle.org/portals/0/pdf/articles/policy_brief_balfanz.pdf

Barber, B. K., & Olsen, J. A. (2004). Assessing the transitions to middle and high school. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 19*(1), 3-30. doi:10.1177/0743558403258113

Beland, K. (2014). Easing the transition to middle adolescence: Educational implications. *Journal of Character Education, 10*(1), 61-67. Retrieved from www.ebsco.com

Bellmore, A. (2011). Peer rejection and unpopularity: Associations with GPAs across the transition to middle school. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 103*(2), 282-295. doi: 10.1037.a0023312

Bendall, P., Bolhoefer, A., & Koilpillai, V. (2015). *AVID critical thinking and engagement: A schoolwide approach.* San Diego, CA: AVID Press.

Brown, D. F., & Knowles, T. (2007). *What every middle school teacher should know* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Henemann.

California Department of Education. (n.d.). *Taking center stage: Act II (TCSII): A portal for middle grades educators.* Retrieved from https://pubs.cde.ca.gov/tcsii/index.aspx

Calvert, L. (2011, May 16). Recognizing education's middle school syndrome. [Web log comment]. Retrieved from http://blog.ed.gov/2011/05/recognizing-education%E2%80%99s-middle-school-syndrome/

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1989). *Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century.* The Report of the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents. New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1995). *Great transitions: Preparing adolescents*

    for a new century. New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Caskey, M. M., & Ruben, B. (2003). Research for awakening adolescent learning. *Education*

    Digest, 69(4), 36-38. Retrieved from www.ebsco.com

Cauley, K. M., & Jovanovich, D. (2006). Developing an effective transition program for students

    entering middle school or high school. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Education*

    Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 80(1), 15-25. doi: 10.3200/tchs.80.1.15-25

Choundhury, S., Blakemore, S. J., & Charman, T. (2006). Social cognitive development during

    adolescence. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience, 1*(3), 165-174. doi:

    10.1093/scan/ns1024

Chung, H., Elias, M., & Schneider, K. (1998). Patterns of individual adjustment changes during

    middle school transition. *Journal of School Psychology*, *36*(1), 83-101.

    doi: 10.1016/s0022-4405(97)00051-4

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for*

    developing grounded theory (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Crosnoe, R. (2001). Academic orientation and parental involvement in education during high

    school. *Sociology of Education, 74*(3), 210. doi: 10.2307/2673275

Daniel, G. (2011). Family-school partnerships: Towards sustainable pedagogical practice. *Asia-*

    Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 39(2), 165-176. doi:

    10.1080/1359866X.2011.560651

Danielsen, A. G., Wiium, N., Wihelmsen, B. U., & Wold, B. (2010). Perceived support provided

    by teachers and classmates and students' self-reported academic initiative. *Journal of*

    School Psychology, 48(3), 247-267. doi: 10.1016/j.jsp.2010.02.002

Demaray, M. K., & Malecki, C. K. (2002). Critical levels of perceived social support associated with student adjustment. *School Psychology Quarterly, 17*(3), 213-241. doi: 10.121/scpq.17.3.213.20883

Duchesne, S., Ratelle, C. F., Poitras, S. C., & Drouin, E. (2009). Early adolescent attachment to parents, emotional functioning, and worries about the middle school transition. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 29*(5), 743-766. doi: 10.1177/0272431608325502

Duchesne, S., Ratelle, C. F., & Roy, A. (2012). Worries about middle school transition and subsequent adjustment: The moderating role of classroom goal structure. *The Journal of Early Adolescence, 32*(5), 681-710. doi: 10.1177/0272431611419506

Eccles, J. S., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Buchanan, C. M., Reuman, D., Flanagan, C., & Mac Iver, D. J. (1993). Development during adolescence: The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents' experiences in schools and in families. *American Psychologist. 48*(2), 90-101. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.48.2.90

Eccles, J. S., Roeser, R., Vida, M., Fredricks, J., & Wigfield, A. (2006). Motivational and achievement pathways through middle childhood. In L. Balter & C. Tamis-LeMonda (Eds.), *Child psychology: A handbook of contemporary issues* (2nd ed., pp. 325–356). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

Ellerbrock, C. R., & Kiefer, S. M. (2014). Supporting young adolescents' middle-to-high-school transition by creating a ninth grade community of care: Implications for middle grades educators. *Middle School Journal, 45*(3), 3-10. doi: 10.1080/00940771.2014. 11461886

Erath, S. A., Bub, K. L., & Tu, K. M. (2014). Responses to peer stress predict academic outcomes across the transition to middle school. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *36*(1), 5-28. doi: 10.1177/0272431614556350

159

Evanovich, L. L., & Scott, T. M. (2016). Facilitating PBIS implementation: An administrator's guide to presenting the logic and steps to faculty and staff. *Beyond Behavior, 25*(1), 4-8. doi: 10.1177/107429561602500102

Farmer, T. W., Hamm, J. V., Leung, M., Lambert, K., & Gravelle, M. (2011). Early adolescent peer ecologies in rural communities: Bullying in schools that do and do not have a transition during the middle grades. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 40*(9), 1106-17. doi: 10.1007/s10964-011-9684-0

Faulkner, S. A., & Cook, C. M. (2006). Testing vs. teaching: The perceived impact of assessment demands on middle grades instructional practices. *Research in Middle Level Education, 29*(7), 1-13. doi: 10.1080/19404476.2006.11462030

Fields, D. (2002). "Transition 101": from elementary to middle school. *Education Digest, 67*(7), 38-41. Retrieved from www.ebsco.com

Galton, M., & Morrison, I. (2000). Concluding comments. Transfer and transition: The next steps. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *33*(4), 443-449. doi: 10.1016/S0883-0355(00)00027-6

Georgia Department of Education. (2015). *Middles school matters: A guide for Georgia schools on middle school transition.* Retrieved from http://www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/Federal-Programs/Partnerships/Pages/School-Transition.aspx

Gilewski, C. D., & Nunn, M. L. (2016). Research summary: Transitioning young adolescents from elementary to middle school. Retrieved from http://www.amle.org/ServicesEvents/ ResearchSummary/ TabId/622/ArtMID/2112/ArticleID/750/ Transitioning-Young-Adolescents-from-Elementary-to-Middle-School.aspx

Goldstein, S. E., Boxer, P., & Rudolph, E. (2015). Middle school transition stress: links with academic performance, motivation, and school experiences. *Contemporary School Psychology, 19*(1), 21-29. doi: 10.1007/s40688-014-0044-4

Green, A. L., Maynard, D. K., & Stegenga, S. M. (2018). Common misconceptions of suspension: Ideas and alternatives for school leaders. *Psychology in the Schools, 55*(4), 419-428. doi: 10.1002/pits.22111

Hill, L. M., & Mobley, J. A. (2016). *Making the change from elementary to middle school*. (Article No. 22). Retrieved from https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/article_2208c024f16116603abcacff0000bee5e7.pdf?sfvrsn=96d6442c_4

Hill, N. E., Castellino, D. R., Lansford, J. E., Nowlin, P., Dodge, K. A., Bates, J. E., & Pettit, G. S. (2004). Parent academic involvement as related to school behavior, achievement, and aspirations: Demographic variations across adolescence. *Child Development, 75*(5), 1491-1509. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2004.00753.x

Hill, N. E., Witherspoon, D. P., & Bartz, D. (2018). Parental involvement in education during middle school: Perspectives of ethnically diverse parents, teachers, and students. The *Journal of Educational Research, 111*(1), 12-27. doi: 10.1080/00220671.2016.1190910

Hoang, T. (2010). No child left behind: School processes associated with positive changes, collaborative partnership, and principal leadership. *Academic Leadership (15337812), 8*(3), 1-8. Retrieved from http://jproxy.lib.ecu.edu/login?url= http://search.ebscohost.com.jproxy.lib.ecu.edu /login.aspx?direct= true&db= ehh&AN=67740901&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Hornby, G., & Lafaele, R. (2011). Barriers to parental involvement in education: An explanatory model. *Educational Review, 63*(1), 37-52. doi: 10.1080/00131911.2010.488049

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Roseth, C. (2010). Cooperative learning in middle schools: Interrelationship of relationships and achievement. *Middle Grades Research Journal, 5*(1), 1-18. Retrieved from http://www.infoagepub.com/middle-grades-research-journal

Kentucky Department of Education. (n.d.). *Elementary to middle school transition tool kit*. Retrieved from https://education.ky.gov/educational/compschcouns/collegereadiness /Documents/5_Elementary_to_Middle_School_Transition_Toolkit.pdf

Kieffer, M. J., Marinell, W. H., & Nuegebauer, S. R. (2014). Navigating into, through, and beyond the middle grades: The role of middle grades attendance in staying on track for high school graduation. *Journal of School Psychology, 52*(6), 549-565. doi: 10.1016/j.jsp.2014.09.002

Kim, H. Y., Schwartz, K., Cappella, E., & Seidman, E. (2014). Navigating middle grades: Role of social contexts in middle grade school climate. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 54*(1-2), 28-45. doi: 10.1007/s10464-014-9659-x

Kingery, J. N., Erdley, C. A., & Marshall, K. C. (2011). Peer acceptance and friendship as predictors of early adolescents' adjustment across the middle school transition. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 57*(3), 215-243. doi: 10.1353/mpq.2011.0012

Kinney, J. (2007). *Diary of a wimpy kid: Greg Heffley's journal*. New York, NY: Amulet Books.

Koppang, A. (2004). A transition program based on identified student and parent concerns. *Middle School Journal*, *36*(1), 32-36. doi: 10.1080/00940771.2004.1146.1463

Laird, R. D., & Marrero, M. D. (2011). Mothers' knowledge of early adolescents' activities following the middle school transition and pubertal maturation. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 31*(2), 209-233. doi: 10.1177/0272431609361202

Laird, R. D., Pettit, G. S., Dodge, K. A., & Bates, J. E. (2003). Change in parents' monitoring knowledge: Links with parenting, relationship quality, adolescent beliefs, and antisocial behavior. *Social Development, 12*(3), 401–419. doi:10.1111/1467-9507.00240

Langley, G. J., Moen, R. D., Nolan, K. M., Nolan, T. W., Norman C. L., & Provost, L. P. (2009). *The improvement guide: A practical approach to enhancing organizational performance* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

L'Esperance, M. E., Lenker, E., Bullock, A., Lockamy, B., & Mason, C. (2013). Creating a middle grades environment that significantly improves student achievement. *Middle School Journal, 44*(5), 32-39. doi: 10.1080/00940771.2013.11461870

Lorain, P. (2002). *Transition to middle school: Are swirlies for real?* National Education Association. Retrieved from www.nea.org/tools/16657.htm

Mac Iver, D. J. (1990). Meeting the needs of young adolescents: Advisory groups, interdisciplinary teaching teams, and school transition programs. *Phi Delta Kappan, 71*(6), 458-464. Retrieved from www.jstor.org

Madjar, N., & Chohat, R. (2016). Will I succeed in middle school? A longitudinal analysis of self-efficacy in relation to goal structures and engagement. *Educational Psychology, 37*(6), 680-694. doi: 10.1080/01443410.2016.1179265

Malaspina, D., & Rimm-Kaufman, S. (2008). Early predictors of school performance declines at school transition points. *Research in Middle Level Education Online, 31*(9), 1-16. doi: 10.1080/19404476.2008.11462052

Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J., & Pollock, J. E. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

McElroy, C. (2000). Middle school programs that work. *Phi Delta Kappan, 82*(4), 277-292. doi: 10.1177/0031721700082004

McGill, R. K., Hughes, D., Alicea, S., & Way, N. (2012). Academic adjustment across middle school: The role of public regard and parenting. *Developmental Psychology, 48*(4), 1003-1018. doi:10.1037/a0026006

McNeely, C., & Blanchard, J. (2009). *The teen years explained: A guide to healthy adolescent development.* Retrieved from https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/center-for-adolescent-health/_includes/_pre-redesign/Interactive%20Guide.pdf

Miller, C. M., McKissick, B. R., Ivy, J. T., & Moser, K. (2017). Supporting diverse young adolescents: Cooperative grouping in inclusive middle-level settings, *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 90*(3), 86-92. doi: 10.1080/00098655.2017.1285661

Mullins, E. R., & Irvin, J. L. (2000). Transition into middle school. *Middle School Journal, 31*(3), 57-60. doi: 10.1080/00940771.2000.11494629

National Institute of Mental Health. (2011). *The teen brain: Still under construction.* (Publication Number 11-4929). Retrieved from the National Institute of Mental Health website: http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/index.shtml

National Middle School Association. (1982). *This we believe*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

NC Gen Stat §115C-390.1 (2013).

Nelson, H. K., Fairchild, M., Grossenbacher, M., & Landers, L. (2007). Examining effective

    middle grades programs: Stating implications for secondary school reform. *American*

    Secondary Education, 35(2), 52-68.

North Carolina State Board of Education. (2016). *Healthy Active Children Policy* (Policy

    Number SHLT-000). Retrieved from https://stateboard.ncpublicschools.gov/policy-

    manual/student-health-issues/healthy-active-children-policy-20161201

North Carolina State Board of Education. (2017). *Interscholastic Athletics* (Policy Number

    ATHL-001). Retrieved from https:// https://stateboard.ncpublicschools.gov/policy-

    manual/athletics/copy_of_policy-regarding-interscholastic-athletics

OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. (2017).

    Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports [Website]. Retrieved from

    http://www.pbis.org

Pickhardt, C. D. (2011, April 18). Adolescence and the transition to middle school: Come middle

    school, early adolescents collide with secondary education [Blog Post]. Retrieved from

    https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/surviving-your-childs-

    adolescence/201104/adolescence-and-the-transition-middle-school

Pomerantz, E. M., Moorman, E. A., & Litwack, S. D. (2007). The how, whom, and why of

    parents' involvement in children's academic lives: More is not always better. *Review of*

    Educational Research, 77(3), 373-410. doi: 10.3102/003465430305567

Public Schools of North Carolina. (n.d.). *Transition planning for 21st century schools*. Retrieved

    from http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/docs/curriculum/home/transitions.pdf

Public Schools of North Carolina. (2014). *2013-14 State, District, and School Level Summary Data.* [Data Set]. Retrieved from http://www.ncpublicschools.org/ accountability/reporting

Public Schools of North Carolina. (2015). *2014-15 State, District, and School Level Summary Data.* [Data Set]. Retrieved from http://www.ncpublicschools.org/ accountability/reporting

Public Schools of North Carolina. (2016). *2015-16 State, District, and School Level Summary Data.* [Data Set]. Retrieved from http://www.ncpublicschools.org/ accountability/reporting

Public Schools of North Carolina. (2017a). *2016-17 State, District, and School Level Summary Data.* [Data Set]. Retrieved from http://www.ncpublicschools.org/ accountability/reporting

Public Schools of North Carolina. (2017b). *North Carolina Testing Program 2016-2017.* [PDF file]. Retrieved from http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/generalinfo /1617testovervw.pdf

Rice, F., Frederickson, N., & Seymour, J. (2011). Assessing pupil concerns about transition to secondary school. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 81*(2), 244-263. doi: 10.1348/000709910X519333.

Rohanna, K. (2017). Breaking the 'adopt, attack, abandon' cycle: A case for improvement science in K-12 education. *New Directions for Evaluation, 2017*(153), 65-77. doi: 10.1002/ev.20233

Ryan, A., Shim, S., & Makara, K. (2013). Changes in academic adjustment and relational self-worth across the transition to middle school. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence, 42*(9), 1372-1384. doi:10.1007/s10964-013-9984-7

San Antonio, D. M., Marcell, E., Tieken, M., & Wiener, K. (2011). Lives in transition: What students say. [Additional Online Content]. *Educational Leadership*, *68*(7). Retrieved from www.ascd.org.

Sandford, B. A., & Hsu, C. (2007). The Delphi technique: Making sense of consensus. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation, 12*, 1-8. Retrieved from http://pareonline.net/pdf/v12n10.pdf

Schaefer, M. B., Malu, K. F., & Yoon, B. (2016). An historical overview of the middle school movement, 1963-2015. *Research in Middle Level Education, 39*(5), 1-27. doi: 10.1080/19404476.2016.1165036

Schwerdt, G., & West, M. R. (2013). The impact of alternative grade configurations on student outcomes through middle and high school. *Journal of Public Economics*, *97*, 308-32. doi: 10.1016/j.jpubeco.2012.10.002

Shoffner, M. F., & Williamson, R. D. (2000). Facilitating student transitions into middle school. *Middle School Journal*, *31*(4), 47-52. doi: 10.1080/00940771.2000.11494639

Simmons, R. G., Burgerson, R., Carlton-Ford, S. L., & Blyth, D. A. (1987). The impact of cumulative change in early adolescence. *Child Development, 58*, 1120-1234. doi: 10.1111/1467-8624.ep8591121

Smith, T., & McEwin, C. K. (2011). *The legacy of middle school leaders: In their own words* Handbook of Resources in Middle Level Education. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing

Steinberg, L. (2011). Demystifying the adolescent brain. *Educational Leadership, 68*(7), 41-46. Retrieved from www.ascd.org

Steinberg, L. (2015). New foundations of adolescent learning. *Independent School, 74*(3), 94-100. Retrieved from https://www.nais.org/magazine/independent-school/spring-2015/new-foundations-of-adolescent-learning/

Theriot, M. T., & Dupper, D. R. (2010). Student discipline problems and the transition from elementary to middle school. *Education & Urban Society, 42*(2), 205-222. doi: 10.1177/0013124509349583

Tilleczek, K., Laflamme, S., Ferguson, B., Edney, D. R., Girard, M., Cudney, D., & Cardoso, S. (2007, January). *Fresh starts/false starts: A review of literature on the transition from elementary to secondary school.* Paper presented at the Ontario Education Research Symposium, Toronto, Ontario. Retrieved from https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/studentsuccess/Finalstudy.pdf

Toren, N. K. (2013). Multiple dimensions of parental involvement and its links to young adolescent self-evaluation and academic achievement. *Psychology in the Schools, 50*(6), 634-649. doi: 10.1002/pits.21698.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools. (2008). *Making the transition to middle school: How mentoring can help.* (Publication No. 24). Retrieved from http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/making-the-transition-to-middle-school.pdf

U.S. Department of Education, Sustainability Series. (2009). Engaging stakeholders: Including parents and the community to sustain improved reading outcomes. (Publication No. 6). Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/support/stakeholderlores.pdf

Vollet, J. W., Kinderman, T. A., & Skinner, E. A. (2017). In peer matters, teachers matter: Peer group influences on students' engagement depends on teacher involvement. Journal of *Educational Psychology, 109*(5), 635-652. doi: 10.1037/edu0000172

Wang, M., & Holcombe, R. (2010). Adolescents' perceptions of school environment, engagement, and academic achievement in middle school. *American Educational Research Journal*, *47*(3), 633-662. doi: 10.3102/0002831209361209

Wentzel, K. (2003). Sociometric status and adjustment in middle school: A longitudinal study. *The Journal of Early Adolescence, 23*(1), 5-28. doi: 10.1177/0272431602239128

Wigfield, A., Eccles, J. S., Fredricks, J. A., Simpkins, S., Roeser, R. W., & Schiefele, U. (2015). Development of Achievement Motivation and Engagement. *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science, 3*(16), 1-44. doi: 10.1002/9781118963418. childpsy316

World Health Organization. (2016). *Maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health.* Retrieved from http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/topics/adolescence/dev/en/

Wormeli, R. (2011). The middle/high years/movin' up to the middle. *Educational Leadership,* 68(7), 48-53. Retrieved from www.ascd.org

Yoon, B., Malu, K. F., Schaefer, M. B., Reyes, C., & Brinegar, K. (2015). Comprehensive and critical review of middle grades research and practice 2000-2013. *Middle Grades Research Journal, 10*(1), 1-16. Retrieved from www.infoagepub.com/middle-grades-research-journal

Zeedyk, M. S., Gallacher, J., Henderson, M., Hope, G., Husband, B., & Linsday, K. (2003).

    Negotiating the transition from primary to secondary school: Perceptions of pupil,

    parents, and teachers. *School Psychology International, 24*(1), 67-69. doi:

    10.1177/0143034303024001010

APPENDIX A: PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

East Carolina University
College of Education
154 Speight Building, Mail Stop 504
East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858 USA | Phone: 252-328-4260 | Fax: 252-328-4219

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am presently working on my Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at East Carolina University. As part of my degree requirements, I am planning an educational research project that will help me to learn more about assisting students with the transition from elementary to middle school. The fundamental goal of this research study is to create a plan that will relieve much of the student and caregiver stress for that often accompanies this transition.

As part of this research project, your child has the opportunity to participate in several anonymous surveys this year that will allow me to gather student opinions about the transition to middle school. As this study is for educational research purposes only, the results of your child's participation **will not** affect your child's grades and personal data **will not** be collected.

I am requesting permission from you to use your child's opinions in my research study. I am also requesting parent/guardian participation. Please know that participation is entirely voluntary and anonymous.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at (910) 455-2211 or by emailing me at gartnerb05@students.ecu.edu. If you have questions about your child's rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of the OHRI, at 252-744-1971.

If you permit your child's opinions to be used in my study, please return the bottom portion of this form to your child's teacher by Monday, March 20, 2017. Thank you for your interest in my educational research study.

Your Partner in Education,

Brendan Gartner

As the parent or guardian of _____,
(print your student's name)

☐ **I grant my permission for Mr. Gartner to use my child's opinions in his educational research project regarding middle school transitions. I fully understand that my child's responses will be kept completely confidential and will be used only for the purposes of Mr. Gartner's research study. I also understand that I or my child may at any time decide to withdraw my/our permission and that my child's grades will not be affected by withdrawing from the study.**

☐ **I would also like to participate in Mr. Gartner's study. He may send me the anonymous parent/guardian surveys at the following email address:**

_____

Signature of Parent/Guardian:_____
Date_____

APPENDIX B: PARENTAL CONSENT FORM COVER LETTER

East Carolina University
College of Education
154 Speight Building, Mail Stop 504
East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858 USA | Phone: 252-328-4260 | Fax: 252-328-4219

Dear Educator,

I am presently working on my Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at East Carolina University. As part of my degree requirements, I am planning an educational research project that will help me to learn more about assisting students with the transition from elementary to middle school. The fundamental goal of this research study is to create a plan that will relieve much of the student and caregiver stress that often accompanies this transition.

As part of this research project, I am collecting student data regarding their thoughts and feelings about the middle school transition. Enclosed in this envelope, please find permission slips for you students. Once signed and returned, they will allow me to anonymously survey your students and gather the data for my study. I am asking that you send these home with your students as soon as possible and collect them and return them to me via courier on March 20, 2017. The courier envelope can be addressed to Brendan Gartner in Student Services at the district office.

While I do need some assistance with data collection, I am well aware of the demands on your time and I have designed this process to be as minimally intrusive as possible. I am requesting only that you send home, collect, and return any signed permission slips to me via courier at the district office on March 20, 2017, provide the participating students with a URL that I will send you that will direct them to the survey, and allow a few minutes for students to complete the brief surveys. There will be three surveys in total, each shorter than the last, so the time investment should be kept to a minimum.

I cannot thank you enough for your assistance in this endeavor. The intention is not just for me to complete my education, but also to create a program that will benefit all of the Onslow County Schools students transitioning to middle school. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to email me at brendan.gartner@ █████████████ or call me at ███████ ████ .

Your Partner in Education,

Brendan Gartner

APPENDIX C: PHASE ONE STUDENT SURVEY EMAIL TO TEACHERS

Good Morning!

Thank you very, very much for returning the student permission slips for my study. The response has been greater than I hoped. Below is a list of students in your class who returned permission slips.

Student Name
Student Name
Student Name

Please provide these students with this URL sometime this week:

https://goo.gl/█████

If the students have a problem accessing the survey, the URL is case sensitive, so that will be the most likely problem.

Some students not on this list may tell you that they turned in a permission slip. There were a number of slips returned with a signature but no student name and I was unable to determine what student it belonged to. Because of university rules, if the student is not on the list above, they cannot participate in the survey.

The survey should not take more than ten minutes. Please contact me if there are any issues with the survey. Thank you again for all of your help!

Sincerely,

Brendan Gartner

APPENDIX D: VERBAL CONSENT INSTRUCTIONS

East Carolina University
College of Education
154 Speight Building, Mail Stop 504
East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858 USA | Phone: 252-328-4260 | Fax: 252-328-4219

To: Onslow County Schools Grade 5 Teachers
From: Brendan Gartner
RE: Student Survey Assent

Dear Educators:

I am presently working on my Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at East Carolina University. As part of my degree requirements, I am planning an educational research project that will help me to learn more about assisting students with the transition from elementary to middle school. The fundamental goal of this research study is to create a plan that will relieve much of the student and caregiver stress for that often accompanies this transition.

As part of this research project, students have the opportunity to participate in several anonymous surveys this year that will allow me to gather their opinions about the transition to middle school. A list of those students in your class whose parents have permitted them to participate in these surveys is included with this letter. Please take a few moments to read aloud the following statement to the students prior to having them to begin the survey:

SAY: *Thank you for participating in this study that will provide information regarding how students feel about the move from elementary school to middle school. In the survey you are about take, you will be asked some questions about your experiences at school and your thoughts about middle school. All of your answers to this survey are completely anonymous, meaning none of the questions will ask for any information like your name, your age, or anything else that could identify you. Your answers will not be shared with anyone. Your answers will not have any effect on anything else in school, such as your grades. Taking this survey is voluntary and if do not want to participate, you do not have to take the survey.*

If any students indicate that they do not wish to participate at this point, please reassure them that it is their decision whether or not to participate and that it is fine if they do not want to take the survey. Thank you for allowing your students a few moments to participate in this study. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at ▮▮▮▮▮▮ or by emailing me at brendan.gartner@▮▮▮▮▮▮.

Your Partner in Education,

Brendan Gartner

APPENDIX E: PHASE ONE STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Student Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. The information you provide will help to design a plan to help Onslow County students as they move to middle school. This survey is completely anonymous and your individual results cannot be shared with anyone so please give the most accurate and honest answers you can. Thanks again for your help!

1. I feel challenged at school.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

2. It is hard for me to get all of my homework done.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

3. I get bored at school

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

4. Good grades are important to me.

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

5. The work I do in school helps me when I am not in school.

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

6. I like my teachers.

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

7. I can trust my teachers to help me with problems besides schoolwork.

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

8. My teachers care about me.

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

9. I can get help from my teachers on my schoolwork when I need it.

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

10. My teachers listen to me.

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

11. School is important to me.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

12. I would recommend my school to someone moving to my town.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

13. Students at my school treat each other well.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

14. The rules at my school are fair.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

15. I feel safe at school.

❍ Strongly agree
❍ Agree
❍ Somewhat agree
❍ Neither agree nor disagree
❍ Somewhat disagree
❍ Disagree
❍ Strongly disagree

16. I think I am smart.

❍ Strongly agree
❍ Agree
❍ Somewhat agree
❍ Neither agree nor disagree
❍ Somewhat disagree
❍ Disagree
❍ Strongly disagree

17. When I am at school, I feel like I belong.

❍ Strongly agree
❍ Agree
❍ Somewhat agree
❍ Neither agree nor disagree
❍ Somewhat disagree
❍ Disagree
❍ Strongly disagree

18. People at school like me.

❍ Strongly agree
❍ Agree
❍ Somewhat agree
❍ Neither agree nor disagree
❍ Somewhat disagree
❍ Disagree
❍ Strongly disagree

19. I have friends that I can trust to help me with my problems.

❍ Strongly agree
❍ Agree
❍ Somewhat agree
❍ Neither agree nor disagree
❍ Somewhat disagree
❍ Disagree
❍ Strongly disagree

20. I enjoy going to school.

❍ Strongly agree
❍ Agree
❍ Somewhat agree
❍ Neither agree nor disagree
❍ Somewhat disagree
❍ Disagree
❍ Strongly disagree

22. Please list some things you are worried about when you think about moving to middle school (as many as you can, but no more than ten.)

22. Please list some things you are excited about when you think about moving to middle school (as many as you can, but no more than ten.)

APPENDIX F: PHASE ONE PARENT SURVEY EMAIL

East Carolina University
College of Education
154 Speight Building, Mail Stop 504
East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858 USA | Phone: 252-328-4260 | Fax: 252-328-4219

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Thank you very much agreeing to participate in this brief survey and for allowing your children to participate in my study. The survey is designed to take only a few minutes of your time and the results will help me create a transition plan for students moving from the elementary school to the middle school. This survey is similar to the one your child will take. Just as a reminder, the survey is completely anonymous and personal data will not be collected. Here is a link to the survey:

Middle School Transition Parent/Guardian Survey

In addition to this survey, I would like to put together one or two parent/guardian focus groups to be interviewed regarding their thoughts about middle school. Each group would consist of about ten people. If you are interested in participating in a focus group, please respond to this email indicating that you would like to do so.

Thank you again for your time. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Brendan Gartner
Student Services Director, Onslow County Schools
Doctoral Candidate, East Carolina University

APPENDIX G: PHASE ONE PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Parent Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. The information you provide will help to design a plan to help Onslow County Students to successfully and smoothly transition to middle school. This survey is completely anonymous and no personal data is tracked or recorded so please give the most accurate and honest answers you can. Thanks again for your help!

1. My child feels challenged at school.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

2. My child says he/she is bored at school.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

3. My child can get extra help at school if he/she needs it.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

4. It is hard for my child to get all their homework done.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

5. The work my child does in school is relevant to their lives outside of school.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

6. There is effective communication between the school and home.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

7. There are opportunities for parents to be involved at school.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

8. Besides Back to School/Open House, I have been invited to visit my child's classroom.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

9. The school encourages parent feedback to improve educational services.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

10. Parents and educators at my child's school work together as a team.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

11. My child thinks school is important.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

12. I would recommend my child's school to someone moving to my town.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

13. To the best of my knowledge, students at my child's school treat each other well.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

14. The rules at my child's school are fair.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

15. My child feels safe at school.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

16. The school expresses high expectations for my child.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

17. My child feels valued at school.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

18. My child feels well-liked by other students.

○ Strongly agree
○ Agree
○ Somewhat agree
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Somewhat disagree
○ Disagree
○ Strongly disagree

19. My child has friends at school that he/she can trust.

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

20. My child enjoys going to school.

- ○ Strongly agree
- ○ Agree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Strongly disagree

21. Please list some things you are worried about when you think about your child moving to middle school (as many as you can, but no more than ten.)

22. Please list some things you are excited about when you think about your child moving to middle school (as many as you can, but no more than ten.)

APPENDIX H: PHASE TWO STUDENT SURVEY EMAIL TO TEACHERS

Good Morning!

Thank you again for providing your students with a few moments to complete the first survey about middle school transitions. Please take a moment sometime this week to provide the approved students with the link below for the second survey (there are three total.)

https://goo.gl/█████

As a reminder, the URL is case-sensitive if any students have problems accessing it.

This survey is only two questions. The software I am using estimates less than one minute for the survey, but I am figuring on somewhere between three and five minutes. The survey is just two drag and drop lists. Students hover the mouse cursor over a choice and it will highlight that choice. They will just click, hold, and drag the choice to where they want it on the list.

Here is the list of students who submitted permission slips to participate:

Student Name
Student Name
Student Name

Thank you again for allowing few moments of time for students to participate in my study. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this survey about the move to middle school. There are only two questions in this survey and they are based on the results from the first survey you answered. Remember, this survey is completely anonymous and your individual results cannot be shared with anyone, so please give the most accurate and honest answers you can. Thanks again for your help!

On the first survey, you were asked to list some things you were worried about when thinking about moving to middle school. The list below shows the ten most common types of answers for that question and some examples of answers that fit into that category. Please put them in order from things you are most worried about to least worried about (what you are most worried about moving to middle school should be at the top of your list.) Just drag and drop each one into its place on your list.

- Friendships (For example: I won't know anyone, no one will like me, it will be hard to make new friends)
- Bullying (For example: Being bullied, people making fun of me, people being mean)
- The amount or difficulty of the work (For example: Lots of homework, harder work, not understanding the work)
- My grades (For example: Getting bad grades, not getting A's and B's, failing)
- Teachers (For example: The teachers might be mean, the teachers might be strict, I won't know the teachers)
- Movement (For example: Having to change classes, getting lost, being late to class)
- Classes (For example: Math, reading, having physical education every day)
- Social concerns (For example: Drama, being the new kid, learning how middle school is different from elementary school)
- School climate (For example: New rules, other students misbehaving, fights, drugs)
- Concerns about yourself (For example: Getting stressed out, growing up, making mistakes)

On the first survey, you were asked to list some things you were excited about when thinking about moving to middle school. The list below shows the eight most common types of answers for that question and some examples of answers that fit into that category. Please put them in order from things you are most excited about to least excited about (what you are most excited about moving to middle school should be at the top of your list.) Just drag and drop each one into its place on your list.

- Friendships (For example: Making new friends, seeing old friends, meeting people from other schools)
- Having more/new Teachers (For example: Different teachers for each class, meeting new teachers, getting to know new teachers)
- Having more/new Classes (For example: Different Encores, PE every day, having a different schedule)

- Independence (For example: No lines when switching classes, having a locker, being treated more like an adult)
- Extracurricular activities (For example: Clubs, sports, leadership activities)
- New learning experiences (For example: Learning new things, more challenging work, finding different ways to learn)
- New school experiences (For example: Being in a new building, going to sixth grade, leaving elementary school)
- Personal growth (For example: A fresh start, growing up, trying new things)

APPENDIX J: PHASE THREE STUDENT SURVEY EMAIL TO TEACHERS

Final Survey!! Thank you so much for all of your help with my study. I hope that the surveys were not difficult to manage and that it did not take up much of your time. This last student survey is just like the last one, only shorter. There are only five choices in the two questions and the students already know how to order the choices, so this should take one or two minutes at most. The participating students are listed below. Please allow them a brief moment this week to complete the survey. Thank you again for all of your help!

https://goo.gl/█████

(By the way, before the end of the year, I will be sending out a brief teacher survey about middle school transitions. I would love to know your thoughts!)

Student Name
Student Name
Student Name

Thank you again for allowing few moments of time for students to participate in my study. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX K: PHASE THREE STUDENT SURVEY

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this final survey about the move to middle school. There are only two questions in this survey and they are based on the results from the first survey you answered. Remember, this survey is completely anonymous and your individual results cannot be shared with anyone, so please give the most accurate and honest answers you can. Thanks again for all of your help! Have a great summer!

On the second survey, you were asked to order a list of things that students said they were worried about when thinking about moving to middle school. The list below shows the five top answers and some examples of answers that fit into that category. Please put the list below in order from things you are most worried about to least worried about (what you are most worried about moving to middle school should be at the top of your list.) Just drag and drop each one into its place on your list.

- The amount or difficulty of the work (For example: Lots of homework, harder work, not understanding the work)
- Bullying (For example: Being bullied, people making fun of me, people being mean)
- Friendships (For example: I won't know anyone, no one will like me, it will be hard to make new friends)
- My grades (For example: Getting bad grades, not getting A's and B's, failing)
- Movement (For example: Having to change classes, getting lost, being late to class)

On the second survey, you were asked to order a list of things that students said they were excited about when thinking about moving to middle school. The list below shows the five top answers and some examples of answers that fit into that category. Please put the list below in order from things you are most excited about to least excited about (what you are most worried about moving to middle school should be at the top of your list.) Just drag and drop each one into its place on your list.

- Friendships (For example: Making new friends, seeing old friends, meeting people from other schools)
- Independence (For example: No lines when switching classes, having a locker, being treated more like an adult)
- Extracurricular activities (For example: Clubs, sports, leadership activities)
- New school experiences (For example: Being in a new building, going to sixth grade, leaving elementary school)
- Personal growth (For example: A fresh start, growing up, trying new things)

APPENDIX L: PHASE THREE TEACHER SURVEY INFORMATIONAL LETTER

East Carolina University
College of Education
154 Speight Building, Mail Stop 504
East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858 USA | Phone: 252-328-4260 | Fax: 252-328-4219

Dear Colleague,

I am presently working on my Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at East Carolina University. As part of my degree requirements, I am planning an educational research project that will help me to learn more about assisting students with the transition from elementary to middle school. The fundamental goal of this research study is to create a plan that will relieve much of the student and caregiver stress that often accompanies this transition.

As part of this research project, you have the opportunity to participate in an anonymous survey that will allow me to gather teacher opinions about the transition to middle school. As this study is for educational research purposes only, personal data **will not** be collected.

I am requesting your assistance with this study. In the next week, you will be sent an anonymous survey with the intention of gathering your thoughts and opinions about the student transition from elementary to middle school. Participation in this study completely anonymous and voluntary.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at ███████████ or by emailing me at brendan.gartner@███████████. If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of the OHRI, at 252-744-1971.

If you are interested in participating in this study, simply respond to the survey that will be sent to you via email. Thank you for your interest in my educational research study.

Your Partner in Education,

Brendan Gartner

APPENDIX M: PHASE THREE TEACHER SURVEY EMAIL

Good Evening!

Thank you once again for all of your help with my study. I know that your time is very valuable and I appreciate all of the time you took to assist me. As a final piece of data collection, I would like to ask you what you think about the transition to middle school. My preliminary research has shown that relatively few programs and studies take teacher input into account. It my belief that your expertise is invaluable when considering transition programs for our students and I would sincerely appreciate your thoughts. Below is a link to a teacher survey. It should not take more than 10 minutes (there are only 8 questions, but some are open ended.)   Please remember that participation is strictly voluntary and completely anonymous. If you choose to participate, please complete the survey prior to leaving for the summer. Thank you again for everything and I hope you have a wonderful break!!

<u>Teacher Survey</u>

APPENDIX N: PHASE THREE GRADE FIVE TEACHER SURVEY

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this survey about middle school transitions. My preliminary research has shown that relatively few programs and studies take teacher input into account. It my belief that your expertise is invaluable when considering transition programs for our students and I would sincerely appreciate your thoughts. Remember, this survey is completely anonymous and your individual results cannot be shared with anyone, so please give the most accurate and honest answers you can. Thanks again for all of your help! Have a great summer!

Over a series of questionnaires, students were asked what most WORRIED them about the move to middle school. Below are their five most common answers. Please drag and drop the choices below to place them in the order that you believe students listed them from most worried to least worried.

- My grades (For example: Getting bad grades, not getting A's and B's, failing)
- Friendships (For example: I won't know anyone, no one will like me, it will be hard to make new friends)
- The amount or difficulty of the work (For example: Lots of homework, harder work, not understanding the work)
- Bullying (For example: Being bullied, people making fun of me, people being mean)
- Movement (For example: Having to change classes, getting lost, being late to class)

Over a series of questionnaires, students were asked what most EXCITED them about the move to middle school. Below are their five most common answers. Please drag and drop the choices below to place them in the order that you believe students listed them from most excited to least excited.

- Independence (For example: No lines when switching classes, having a locker, being treated more like an adult)
- New school experiences (For example: Being in a new building, going to sixth grade, leaving elementary school)
- Personal growth (For example: A fresh start, growing up, trying new things)
- Friendships (For example: Making new friends, seeing old friends, meeting people from other schools)
- Extracurricular activities (For example: Clubs, sports, leadership activities)

What, if any, transition activities are you aware of that are sponsored by the district?

What, if any, transition activities are of you aware of that are sponsored by your school?

What are some activities that you believe should be implemented to help students before transitioning to middle school?

What are some activities that you believe should be implemented to help students after transitioning to middle school?

What do you think are some of the most important skills/information that students need to learn prior to moving to middle school?

APPENDIX O: PHASE THREE GRADE SIX TEACHER SURVEY

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this survey about middle school transitions. My preliminary research has shown that relatively few programs and studies take teacher input into account. It my belief that your expertise is invaluable when considering transition programs for our students and I would sincerely appreciate your thoughts. Remember, this survey is completely anonymous and your individual results cannot be shared with anyone, so please give the most accurate and honest answers you can. Thanks again for all of your help! Have a great summer!

Over a series of questionnaires, students were asked what most WORRIED them about the move to middle school. Below are their five most common answers. Please drag and drop the choices below to place them in the order that you believe students listed them from most worried to least worried.

- My grades (For example: Getting bad grades, not getting A's and B's, failing)
- Friendships (For example: I won't know anyone, no one will like me, it will be hard to make new friends)
- The amount or difficulty of the work (For example: Lots of homework, harder work, not understanding the work)
- Bullying (For example: Being bullied, people making fun of me, people being mean)
- Movement (For example: Having to change classes, getting lost, being late to class)

Over a series of questionnaires, students were asked what most EXCITED them about the move to middle school. Below are their five most common answers. Please drag and drop the choices below to place them in the order that you believe students listed them from most excited to least excited.

- Independence (For example: No lines when switching classes, having a locker, being treated more like an adult)
- New school experiences (For example: Being in a new building, going to sixth grade, leaving elementary school)
- Personal growth (For example: A fresh start, growing up, trying new things)
- Friendships (For example: Making new friends, seeing old friends, meeting people from other schools)
- Extracurricular activities (For example: Clubs, sports, leadership activities)

What, if any, transition activities are you aware of that are sponsored by the district?

What, if any, transition activities are of you aware of that are sponsored by your school?

What are some activities that you believe should be implemented to help students before transitioning to middle school?

What are some activities that you believe should be implemented to help students after transitioning to middle school?

What do you think are some of the most important skills/information that students need to learn prior to moving to middle school?

What important skills/information do you believe students are typically lacking when they transition to middle school?

APPENDIX P: PHASE FOUR STUDENT SURVEY EMAIL TO TEACHERS

Good Morning,

My name is Brendan Gartner and along with working for Onslow County Schools, I am presently working on my Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at East Carolina University. As part of my degree requirements, I am planning an educational research project that will help me to learn more about assisting students with the transition from elementary to middle school. The fundamental goal of this research study is to create a plan that will relieve much of the student and caregiver stress that often accompanies this transition.

During their fifth grade year, some of your students' parents granted permission for them to participate in this research. As part of my research, those students have completed several online surveys. This is a list of your students who have been participating:

Student
Student Name
Student Name
Student Name

To complete my data collection, I am requesting that you please provide the above named students with the URL below during homeroom and allow them a few minutes so that they may complete this final survey.

https://goo.gl/█████

If the students have a problem accessing the survey, the URL is case sensitive, so that will be the most likely problem.

Some students not on this list may tell you that they turned in a permission slip or have been participating. Because of university rules, if the student is not on the list above, they cannot participate in the survey.

The survey should take less than ten minutes. Please contact me if there are any issues with the survey. Thank you again for all of your help!

APPENDIX Q: PHASE FOUR PARENT SURVEY LETTER

East Carolina University
College of Education
154 Speight Building, Mail Stop 504
East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858 USA | Phone: 252-328-4260 | Fax: 252-328-4219

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Last April, you were gracious enough to agree to participate in my study regarding middle school transitions and you took the time to complete a brief survey. Now that your child has transitioned to middle school, I would again ask that you complete a brief survey about their experiences in school so far in sixth grade. The survey is designed to take only a few minutes of your time and the results will help me create a transition plan for students moving from the elementary school to the middle school. Just as a reminder, the survey is completely anonymous and personal data will not be collected.

Here is a link to the survey:

Middle School Transition Parent/Guardian Survey: Grade 6 Students

For those parents/guardians who agreed to participate in a focus group, I will be sending out a separate email shortly with potential dates/times.

Thank you again for your time. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX R: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office

4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682

600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834

Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · www.ecu.edu/irb

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB

To: Brendan Gartner

CC: Jim McDowelle

Date: 3/7/2017

Re: UMCIRB 17-000274
      Awkward to Awesome

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 3/7/2017 to 3/6/2018. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category #7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
Awkward to Awsome IRB Proposal .docx	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Dissertation Parent Survey Questions.docx	Surveys and Questionnaires
Dissertation Student Survey Questions.docx	Surveys and Questionnaires
Letter to Parents (Spanish Version).docx	Translated Consent Document
Letter to Parents.docx	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Letter to Parents.docx	Consent Forms
Letter to Teachers.docx	Consent Forms
Letter to Teachers.docx	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
OCS IRB Approval.pdf	Dataset Use Approval/Permission
Verbal Consent for Students.docx	Consent Forms

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418
IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418

APPENDIX S: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD CONTINUING APPROVAL

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office
4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · www.ecu.edu/irb

Notification of Continuing Review Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB

To: Brendan Gartner

CC: Jim McDowelle

Date: 1/16/2018

Re: CR00006598
UMCIRB 17-000274
Awkward to Awesome

The continuing review of your expedited study was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 1/15/2018 to 1/14/2019. This research study is eligible for review under expedited category #7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk. Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Document	Description
Awkward to Awsome IRB Proposal .docx(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Dissertation Parent Survey Questions.docx(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
Dissertation Student Survey Questions.docx(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
Letter to Parents (Spanish Version).docx(0.01)	Translated Consent Document
Letter to Parents.docx(0.02)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Letter to Parents.docx(0.01)	Consent Forms
Letter to Teachers.docx(0.01)	Consent Forms
Letter to Teachers.docx(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
OCS IRB Approval.pdf(0.01)	Dataset Use Approval/Permission
Verbal Consent for Students.docx(0.01)	Consent Forms

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.