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## **Mixed-methodology approach to the study of student problems associated with the transition from middle school to high school**

Tony Wayne McGee

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MIXED-METHODOLOGY APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF STUDENT  
PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE TRANSITION FROM  
MIDDLE SCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL

By

Tony Wayne McGee

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Faculty of  
Mississippi State University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Education Administration  
in the Department of Leadership and Foundations

Mississippi State, Mississippi

August 2009

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2009

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MIDDLE SCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL

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The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of ninth-grade students and their teachers and parents/guardians with regard to the transition from middle school to high school. A mixed-method approach with both qualitative and quantitative measures assessed attitudes toward this transition. Student focus groups were also conducted toward this end. Parents and school staff were surveyed to gain insight into the problems associated with the student transition.

Data gathered from students, parents, and school faculty were also analyzed to facilitate the design of a school-transition program for the local high school serving as the study site in this research. The findings support research that has indicated academic and social problems confronted by students transitioning into high school. All three study groups agree that developing a program to effectuate early adjustment by students and parents to this transition will “pave the way” toward ultimate student success.

Key words: school transition, focus-group study, mixed methodology

## DEDICATION

To my wife Tammy, son Tyler, and daughter Tori. I thank you for your love and support and dedicate this work to each of you.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sincere gratitude is extended to those who have encouraged me through this process. Dr. Jerry Mathews has served as my major professor and dissertation director. His kind words throughout this process and dedication to my success have provided invaluable support, as well as personal and professional growth. Dr. Vincent McGrath will always be remembered for his encouragement and generous advice. Thanks is also extended to my committee members—Dr. Fred Perkins and Dr. John Wyatt—for their assistance and support.

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Gratitude is also extended to my mother and father, each of whom has sacrificed much to ensure that I might have a better life. Your hard work and dedication on my behalf has modeled ideals that contributed to the completion of this challenging life milestone. Although my father has passed away, I sense his pride in me and continued watch over my life. The eternal love and support extended unconditionally by my mother will never be forgotten. I am also most appreciative of my mother- and father-in-law for their acceptance of me into their family. The two greatest gifts I have received from them

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Students attending contemporary American schools are forced to learn increasingly more information at an increasingly rapid rate. Each year, the educational demands placed upon both students and teachers are greater. To meet federal and state requirements, students are forced to pass a battery of tests, which begin upon entering high school. Despite many attempts at educational reform, one third of all U.S. students are leaving high school without a diploma (Barton, 2005). These youth are faced with a serious challenge as they seek to gain entry into the global workforce of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The income-earning ability of high school dropouts is significantly lower than that of graduates; the gap is certainly wider when compared to the income capabilities of college graduates. The U.S. Bureau of Census (2006) reported that the average annual wage earned by a high school dropout during 2005 was \$17,229, compared to \$26,933 for a high school graduate and \$52,671 for a college graduate. Rouse (2005) reported that the average cost to the nation for each student exiting high school prematurely, over the course of his or her lifetime, is approximately \$260,000.

To prevent student dropout, schools must meet the educational and social needs of students with administrators who will intervene in the education process before students begin down a path toward failure. A critical period is the transition from middle school to high school. Researchers have identified the ninth grade as the most crucial juncture with

regard to preventing loss of student motivation and the continued spiral of academic failure toward ultimate premature departure from school (Reents, 2002). The transition into high school is a key point in time as students move from often smaller and more supportive middle schools to the larger high school setting where academic and social demands dramatically rise (Herlihy, 2007).

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of ninth-grade students and their teachers and parents/guardians with regard to the transition from middle school to high school. A successful school-transition program holds the potential to create a lasting cultural change throughout schools. Educators must be concerned about creating an environment for student success. Students entering high school battle both academic and social problems associated with the progression from middle school to high school. Ensuring a smooth transition from one school to another will lay a firm foundation for student achievement. Related programs can accelerate student achievement, decrease discipline problems, reduce absenteeism, and increase student self-esteem. Involved parents are more likely to know the names of the teachers educating their children and participate in class selections. They are also more likely to be involved in the local parent-teacher organization and more supportive of the school district.

School faculty trained in the school transition under study are more likely to be sensitive to the needs of incoming ninth-grade students. It is important to student success that faculty are aware of both the academic and social problems students encounter

during the progression to high school. Student achievement during the first year of high school will facilitate graduation at the appropriate time. Schools have become so focused on state-mandated testing that educators have begun to view students as “by-products” of a “testing mill.” Student achievement must be measured not only through testing, but also in self-esteem and social skills exhibited through their interaction with peers and faculty. It is the job of schools to cultivate environments conducive to learning and positive social and parental interaction.

### Statement of the Problem

Numerous transition programs with various approaches have been developed with the objective of decreasing problems associated with the progression from middle school to high school (Hertzog & Morgan 1997, 1998a; Mizelle, 1995; Reents, 2002). They have presented various levels of success; however, the problems persist. The need remains for additional research to better understand all challenges associated with such transition. The purpose of this study was to provide a venue wherein students, parents, and school staff involved in the transition to high school would have an opportunity to contribute their insight and recommendations toward the development of successful problem intervention. The study is distinctive in its application of a mixed-methodology approach incorporating both qualitative and quantitative measures. The research targets three population groups affected by the transition from middle school to high school—ninth-grade students, their parents/guardians, and their teachers.

A focus-group approach was also implemented in this research to assess student perceptions of middle school compared to high school. The qualitative data gathered

from the group sessions were analyzed to form design recommendations for a transition program. Each of five focus groups consisted of between four and six students. Two groups were comprised of solely males, two were solely females, and the fifth focus group consisted of a mixed-gender student sample. The students were randomly selected from the overall pool of ninth-grade students. A mock session was first conducted to determine any potential problems, the session duration required, and any needed modifications to the prepared questions for discussion.

Parents of the student sample, as well as the school staff involved in the education of these ninth-grade students, were surveyed to gain insight into the problems associated with the transition from middle school to high school. Toward this end, a Likert-type survey was administered. Behavior patterns were sought in the analysis of the responses to facilitate successful transition with greater ease for students. The survey contained an appropriate number of questions instructing participants to rate each item by checking the correct response (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). The instrument was initially reviewed by an expert panel of teachers and a leading author on school transition to strengthen its validity and reliability. A test-retest method of securing internal consistency was applied.



## Research Questions and Significance of the Study

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the academic, social, and psychological perceptions of students transitioning from middle school to high school?
2. What insight and recommendations can ninth-grade students and their parents/guardians and teachers contribute that can be applied to the design of intervention programs in support of students transitioning from middle school to high school?
3. What interventions can be imbedded within school programs to reduce student attrition during the transition from middle school to high school?

Concern over the problems associated with the transition from middle to high school is ongoing. This research not only provides a clearer understanding of the issues involved, but also contributes to specific programs designed to effectively decrease related problems. The findings will support these continued efforts by both the education and research communities. It provides the components from which a specific transition program was designed for the participating school to exemplify the process.

Implementation of the focus-group methodology, with students as the sole participants, presents an innovative study that will stimulate subsequent research into this prevalent societal problem.

## Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout this research and are defined for purposes of the study:

*Adolescence* refers to a period of physical and psychological development between childhood and adulthood.

A *focus group* involves a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain the perceptions of a specified study group with regard to a defined area of interest within a permissive, nonthreatening environment.

*Focus-group research* involves the exploration of a carefully selected set of research questions with a group of homogeneous study participants. It is qualitative in nature and an effective and efficient avenue toward the exploration of educational needs and expectations.

*Graduation rate* is defined as the percentage of students who have completed high school within the standard number of years, which is calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in Grade 9 into the total number subsequently graduating from high school 3.5 years later.

*High school* refers to the academic grade levels of 9 through 12. Entry to Grade 9 from middle school is the point of transition under study.

*Middle school* refers to the academic grade levels of 6 through 8. The term *junior high* is synonymous to *middle school*.

*Transition* is the interim period of uncertainty with movement from one state of certainty to another (e.g., middle school to high school).

*Transition programs* are interventions specifically addressing the transition period from middle school to high school.

## Assumptions and Limitations

This study was conducted under the assumption that the focus-group approach to research is a viable means of exploration with regard to issues related to academic transition, specifically those emerging during the transition from middle school to high school. Another assumption was that the students participating in the focus group would contribute in an eager and active manner. Lastly, it was assumed that qualitative means of examining, categorizing, tabulating, and otherwise recombining evidence from recorded tapes and field notes are valid and acceptable procedures for data collection and analysis, as well as for documentation of the findings. This study was limited to five focus-group sessions within one school system. Consequently, the findings may not be directly generalizable to other school settings.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

All students will encounter academic transition. For youth entering early adolescence, this phase offers opportunities for success or failure with lifetime consequences. Each student will move through school on a path toward graduation. The grade-level organization of many schools requires multiple transitions—elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, and high school to college or the workplace. These transitions can cause fear and anxiety as students enter new environments with no knowledge of what to expect. The transition from one educational environment to another can be fraught with both academic and social challenges.

Research has clearly indicated that the first year of high school is pivotal. The transition into high school is often characterized by a decline in grades and attendance (Barone, Aguire-Deandries, & Trickett, 1991). School systems must support first-year high school students to improve their chance of success. Success during this vulnerable period often determines student success throughout the balance of high school and beyond. However, more students fail during their freshman year of high school than within any other academic grade. Twenty-nine U.S. states and the District of Columbia view the ninth grade as the most problematic in terms of student retention (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2006). Some states have recorded a rate as high as 20% in decreased enrollment between Grades 9 and 10 (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

Nationally, more than one third of the students who ultimately exit high school prematurely (35%), do so during the transition from the 9<sup>th</sup> - to the 10<sup>th</sup>-grade level. For every 100 students enrolled in the ninth grade, 89 will remain in school until their sophomore year, 81 until their junior year, and 75 will not drop out until their senior year. Seventy percent of freshmen will earn a diploma within the standard 4 years (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2006).

### School Transition

The transition from middle school to high school can be difficult and troubling to young teens. Many students navigate the transition from middle school to high school smoothly and successfully, while others are lost in the maze of corridors, fast-paced schedules, and rigorous course requirements (Black, 2004). As elementary-school students visualize themselves in high school, they often draw upon a vast storehouse of lore passed on from those who have gone before them. Frequently spurred by rumor, and further fueled by teacher warnings, fear fall into several categories—(a) an image of high school as huge and confusing, (b) visualization of an overload of work that is also more difficult, and/or (c) an image of older students ready to “haze” or bully incoming freshmen (Cushman, 2006). Navigating a new building, new teachers, new class subjects, higher academic expectations, an unfamiliar peer group, and perhaps a different busing system are only a few of the challenges adolescents face during school transition.

## Social Adjustment

A new school is typically expected to bring many changes as the familiar is replaced with the unfamiliar. This transition often occurs concurrently with many other adjustments, the most significant of which is the onset of puberty (Simmons, Burgeson, Careton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987). Students at this stage of life experience physical, social, and emotional change. Wiles and Bondi (2001) documented that the middle-school years (i.e., 10–14 years of age) are characterized by emotional instability. As noted earlier, students are also facing environmental changes associated with the transition from one school setting to another, tougher academic requirements, larger school size, and unfamiliar social interaction.

Studies have indicated that social interaction among peer groups suffers during the early phase of the transitional period from middle school to high school (Berliner, 1993; Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Although typically comfortable with their friends, students also experience pressure from peers to participate in behavior that concerns adults (e.g., “cutting” classes, drinking, and excessive partying). Tardiness and truancy are especially problematic for students at risk of not graduating from high school (Phelan, Yu, & Davidson, 1994). Phelan et al. found that nearly 30% of the total number of high school students participating in their study reported pressure from friends to engage in actions the adults in their lives would not condone. As teenagers enter high school, they face all of the emotional changes, challenges, and pressures inherent to approaching adulthood. Adolescence is a chaotic stage in human development, often manifesting internal conflict as the desire for independence mixes with the fear of future responsibility (Berliner,

1993). Students entering high school look forward to more choices, fewer restrictions, and making new friends; however, they also harbor fear surrounding bullies, maintaining high grades, and getting “lost” in the larger environment.

Scott, Rock, Pollack, and Ingels (1995) surveyed a baseline, nationally representative cohort of 21,500 eighth-grade students and followed them for 4 years. These researchers noted that, within the 2-year period between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, the students perceived considerable changes. Nearly three fourths (73%) of the sample who attended high school during 1990 agreed that course work during their first year of high school was more difficult than that of their previous year. More than one half of the cohort (55%) perceived high school teachers as more strict than those of earlier grade levels and high school rules more strictly enforced (56%). Approximately one out of every five students (19%) believed it was more difficult to make friends and felt more alone in high school than in previous years (p. 35). Scott et al. also reported that approximately 6% of their eighth-grade sample never completed high school.

As students transition from middle school to high school, they confront the difficult tasks of dealing with a greater number of peers, interacting with adults in authority, and balancing their needs for support and increased independence. The “stakes” become higher as students begin to connect school success or failure with life opportunities (Hurrelmann, Engel, Holler, & Nordlohne, 1988). They report a wide variety of pressures sourced in their school lives such as with grades, homework, specific teachers, understanding the educational material covered, and isolation in classes. A general concern over the future further complicates these pressures (Phelan et al., 1994).

The transition to high school is often accompanied by negative consequences including a decline in academic achievement (Alspaugh, 1998) and premature departure from high school or failure to graduate as scheduled (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1992), three of every four students report that ninth grade is much more difficult academically, and one of every five report increased feelings of isolation during the ninth grade. In addition to academic struggles, behavioral problems in the form of suspension and expulsion appear to increase significantly during the early phase of the ninth academic year (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). Transitioning students fear physical fighting within the high school arena and interacting with peers who are physically larger.

### *Academic Challenges*

As students transition into high school, along with the common decline in grades, higher incidence of absenteeism is evident (Barone et al., 1991). These students tend to view themselves more negatively and experience an increased need for friendship (Hertzog, Morgan, Diamond, & Walker, 1996). Wheelock (as cited in Black, 2004) found that the ninth grade is a “minefield” for the most vulnerable students. This is especially true for those who become disengaged, discouraged, and fail to develop strong bonds with teachers and the overall school environment. For many students, the singular, most unsettling act leading to a decision to drop from school is the move from one school to another in order to transition into high school (Roderick, 1993).

During the 1980s, the National Association of Secondary School Principals called for additional research focused on the ninth grade of high school. Lounsbury and



Johnston (1985) conducted a widespread study of ninth-grade students within 48 states and the District of Columbia. These researchers were commissioned by the Association to study the effects of school transition on students within this grade level. A disconcerting mismatch was found between school policy and practice and the developmental needs of students 14 years of age. The study also found that ninth-grade students “fell by the wayside,” perceiving school as pointless and endless. During 1985, Lounsbury and Johnston predicted that the ninth grade would “continue to drift [and] mirror the worst of all outmoded high school practices that do little to foster learning for all students” (as cited in Black, 2004, p. 42).

Wheelock (as cited in Black, 2004) conducted a study of high school reform and found that tedious lessons, overcrowded classrooms, and indifferent teachers were among the factors diminishing an already fragile student attachment to school. When students perceive their teachers and schools as uncaring and inhospitable, any preexisting attachment is easily broken. Interviewed or “shadowed” ninth graders repeatedly reported disengaging from school when they sensed a lack of care from teachers in terms of getting to know them as individuals. Although many ninth-grade students report an aspiration to enroll in postsecondary schooling, many also feel they do not belong in school. Such apparently contradictory perspectives suggest a need for school leaders to consider how teaching practice might build upon student strengths to enhance their commitment to school while also ensuring learning experiences worthy of that commitment (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

Hertzog and Morgan (1998b) conducted a study of 450 high schools and their “feeder” middle schools. These researchers found that failing the ninth grade equated to subsequent school dropout for 25% of such students nationwide. According to Hertzog and Morgan, “Ninth grade has become a holding tank for high schools” (p. 96). Many schools far exceed the national average, failing up to 52% of their ninth-grade classes. Substantial research has documented that the transition into high school is marked by increased disengagement and declining motivation, particularly for low-performing youth (National Research Council, 2004). Wheelock and Miao (2005) reported that nationwide enrollment data collected between 1970 and 2000 indicate that graduation rates have fallen steadily since 1984, with the decline accelerating during the 1990s. She defined *graduation rate* as the percentage of students completing their schooling within the standard number of years, which is calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in Grade 9 into the number subsequently graduating from high school 3.5 years later. Using the Wheelock and Miao data and approach, it is apparent that the national graduation rate has fallen from 72% during 1991 to 67% during 2001.

The largest decrease in school enrollment from one academic year to the next is between Grades 9 and 10. As Grade 9 enrollment increases relative to that of Grade 8, student progression between these grade levels becomes more constricted. While the national 10<sup>th</sup>-grade enrollment during 2001 was between 11% and 12% lower than the 9<sup>th</sup>-grade enrollment of the previous year, the difference was much higher within specific states. For example, Florida, South Carolina, Georgia, and Texas reported a Grade-10 enrollment that was 20% lower than the Grade-9 enrollment of the previous year. Prior to

the mid-1980s, between 2% and 5% of all U.S. students enrolled within Grade 9 failed to progress to Grade 10. Student attrition after Grade 11 was far less pronounced (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). Kaufman, Alt, and Chapman (2004) examined high school completion rates from 1972 through 2001. Their study included an examination of characteristics associated with both premature departure from high school and continuing through to completion. The Kaufman et al. final report indicated that, after 1980, high school completion rates stagnated. Additionally, 77% of all school dropouts were between 15 and 18 years of age; approximately two fifths of that group were between the ages of 15 and 17.

#### Grade 9

According to Haney (2003), “Grade nine is a key valve in the education pipeline and is closing for many students, especially minority students” (p. 2). Haney and colleagues (2004) reported that the rate at which students were leaving high school prematurely between Grades 9 and 10 tripled between 1970 and 2000. Attrition between these grade levels began increasing during the late 1970s and dramatically accelerated from the mid-1980s onward. By the turn of the century, nearly 12% fewer students enrolled in Grade 10 than in Grade 9 within public schools across the United States. Haney et al. also reported that, during the 1998-99 school year, 3.86 million students enrolled in Grade 9 with public schools across the country; however, during the 1999-00 school year, 3.42 million students enrolled in Grade 10. This equates to 440,000 students (11.4% of the 1998-99 ninth-grade students) who did not arrive as enrolled in Grade 10 classrooms during the 1999-00 school year.

Another key finding from the analyses of enrollment data conducted by Haney and colleagues (2004) is the sharp increase in students enrolled in Grade 9 since 1970. The report documented by these researchers presents a comparison of Grades 1 through 12 enrollment data between the 1968-69 and 1999-00 school years. The number of students enrolled in Grades 1 through 12 were similar within each grade level, with a total of approximately 42 million across the span of grade levels. The largest discrepancy was during the 1999-00 school year for Grade 9. There were 440,000 more students enrolled in Grade 9 than Grade 8 during the same year and 520,000 more students than indicated by the Grade 10 enrollment. The numbers exhibit retention of ninth-grade students and an erosion of students between Grades 9 and 10.

Statistics also show that students attending the ninth grade comprise the highest percentage of overall high school populations because disproportionate numbers are failing to progress from the ninth grade. Promotion rates for students between Grades 9 and 10 are much lower than those between other grade levels (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). Enrollment figures report 4.19 million students attending Grade 9 during the 2003-04 school year and a loss of approximately 3.75 million (10.5%) the following 2004-05 school year (Laird, Kienzl, Debell, & Chapman, 2007). The reduction in the number of students enrolled in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade reflects both the large number not promoted from the ninth grade and the number of students leaving school prematurely between these grade levels. Since 1970, the increase in students attending Grade 9 has more than tripled from approximately 4% to 13% (Miao & Haney, 2004).

## Graduation Rates

During 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act was introduced and the U.S. Congress and president established the following criterion for evaluating secondary education: “Graduation rates for public secondary school students (defined as the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years)” ( as cited in Miao & Haney, 2004, p. 5). High school graduation rates were thus instituted as one element for measuring school and district performance. By including these rates in the calculations determining whether high school and districts were making adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, federal legislators hoped to discourage schools from allowing students unlikely to meet achievement targets to exit high school prematurely. Academic success during the ninth grade is highly predictive of ultimate graduation. It is a more significant factor in this regard than demographic characteristics or prior academic achievement (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Yet, many students are not provided the extra support needed to successfully transition into the ninth grade of high school. As a result, over one third of all students who exit high school prematurely do so during this freshman year (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2007).

Since 2001, accountability policies have defined school improvement primarily in terms of test scores. The No Child Left Behind Act (as cited in Wheelock & Miao, 2005) has added a new dimension to such assessment by requiring schools to publicly report graduation rates. However, just as high stakes attached to test scores may contribute to using the ninth grade as a “holding tank” for the weakest students, removing them from

the assessment scores collected during high school, attaching high stakes to graduation data could also work against authentic efforts to keep students in school.

### *Teacher Role and At-Risk Students*

Supporting adolescents through a successful transition into high school has been a traditional concern for middle-level educators. Teachers are keenly aware of the importance of ensuring students are comfortable with this transition because it is commonly known that many students decide how long they will remain in school during their initial experience. By adopting effective transition strategies, educators can support ninth-grade students through this period to ultimate academic success (McEwin, 1998; Gruhn & Douglass, 1947; Vars, 1998). A review of the literature reveals that all students need support and assistance during the transition from one school to another. Middle-school and high school administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents must be particularly sensitive to the problems confronted by students entering high school (Weldy, 1995). Comprehensive transition programs must be developed to better inform both students and parents and welcome them into the new school environment.

The risk of academic failure in student populations across the nation is an issue of high priority for U.S. educators and policy makers. The school superintendent for the state of Mississippi, along with the state school board, have set a bold goal to reduce the Mississippi dropout rate by 50% by the 2011-12 school year (Mississippi Department of Education, Office of Dropout Prevention, 2007). To assist schools and communities in addressing the needs of at-risk students, it is important to profile factors leading to educational failure. For students at risk of academic failure, a strong connection to the

school is already jeopardized. A student may have little attachment to teachers perceived as uncaring, lack commitment to studies perceived as irrelevant, exhibit a lack of interest in extracurricular activities, and fail to perceive an investment in school as a reflection of character (Chapman & Sawyer, 2001).

A study conducted by Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) provided important information for school districts to consider when developing transition plans in support of students progressing to new school environments. Adolescents who had left school were interviewed and many described their decisions as a mistake. Given the opportunity to relive that decision, they would choose to remain in school. Many found the classes boring; others found the academics daunting. The Bridgeland et al. report cited frequent absences and lack of follow-up with parents upon the first sign of problems as the most common causal factors of the high dropout rates. Teens have many challenges as they move from middle to high school such as (a) peer pressure, (b) high-stakes testing, (c) competitive sports, (d) the need to concurrently work outside the school, (e) social changes, and (f) symptoms of puberty such as physical and emotional changes.

Education remains at the forefront of state and federal legislation that has already brought many changes designed to increase student achievement. Mandates have included higher graduation requirements, increased teacher salaries, and minimum-competency testing for teachers. However, students at many high schools are still not progressing to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade or dropping from school entirely (Loyacono, 1992).

### *Parent Involvement*

Baker and Stevenson (as cited in Askos & Galassi, 2004), as well as Paulson (as cited in Askos & Galassi, 2004), demonstrated that parental involvement in such pivotal issues as grades and achievement during the transition process from middle school to high school contribute dramatically to student success during the ninth grade. As middle-school students progress to high school, the parental role increases in importance. Parents serve as mentors, tutors, program coordinators, and teachers throughout the transition process. Their involvement allows them to detect developmental problems and work to resolve them in a time-effective manner with the school (White-Hood, 2001). Falbo, Lein, and Amador (2001) found that students with parents who monitor their activities and intervene in a positive manner (e.g., with schoolwork, peer networks, and direct participation in school) were more likely to experience a smooth transition from middle school to high school. Feurestein (2000) noted that increased school contact with parents typically results in reciprocal contact, improving overall communication between schools and families. The International Center for Leadership in Education (2005) succinctly documented, “Despite uncertainties about many matters related to education, the research is clear on one thing—the value of parent involvement” (p. 67).

Parent involvement in the transition process from middle school to high school can be encouraged through a variety of activities (Epstein, 1995). Parents can be invited to participate in a conference with their child and the high school counselor to discuss course work and schedules. They can also be invited to spend a day at the high school to understand the environment within which their child will be immersed, or invited to help



design or facilitate articulation activities for students. Parents of students further along in high school are an excellent resource for parents of transitioning students with regard to encouraging such involvement in school activities (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Family support has been linked to achievement following this transition. Several studies have found the following factors related to academic success after the transition to secondary school:

1. The presence of books within the home.
2. A specific area reserved for study within the home.
3. Parental monitoring of the completion and accuracy of homework.
4. Parental discussion of schoolwork with their children.
5. Parental monitoring of the social lives of their children and helping their children to develop positive peer networks.
6. Parental knowledge of school structure.
7. Parental self-confidence in making demands of the school and interceding on behalf of their children when necessary.
8. Parental ability to use all available resources when supervising, monitoring, and supporting their children both at home and at school.

#### National Longitudinal Study

Why so many students experience difficulty transitioning from middle school to high school remains unknown. The National Longitudinal Study of 1988 was initiated by the National Center for Education Statistics (1992) and involved a sample of 1,052 high school students across the United States. A total of 24,599 eighth-grade students were

surveyed during the base school year of the study (i.e., 1987-88). Many of these students were surveyed again in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000. Data were collected from parents, schools, and teachers. In the first 1990 follow-up, the eighth-grade student cohort was asked to report on their perceptions with regard to the difficulty level of the first year of high school compared to their prior year of schooling. For a majority of the sample, the first year of high school presented greater difficulty than the preceding year. Indeed, nearly three out of four (72.65%) of the participating students agreed that the course work was more difficult than the earlier curriculum. More than half of the students surveyed reported that the high school teachers were more strict (55.03%) and the rules were more strictly enforced (56.05%; Scott & Ingles, 1992).

As reported by Owings and Peng (1992), approximately 6.1% of the eighth-grade students surveyed in the National Longitudinal Study of 1988 left school by the spring of 1990. Among those who remained in school, a small proportion (1.6 %) indicated they would likely not graduate from high school. Consistent with the findings of earlier studies (Kaufman, McMillen, & Whitener, 1991; Peng & Takai, 1983), Owings and Peng also found that Hispanic and African-American students left high school without graduating at a much higher rate than European-American students (i.e., 9.3% of Hispanics, 10.0% of African Americans, and 4.9% of European Americans). Green and Scott (1995) also examined data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 and identified the following six characteristics of eighth-grade students possibly predictive of academic failure or dropping out of school: (a) single-parent family,

(b) annual family income less than \$15,000, (c) an older sibling who dropped out of school, (d) parents who dropped out of high school, (e) limited English proficiency, and/or (f) students at home without adult supervision for more than 3 hours per day.

### School Culture and Successful Transition Programs

Markow, Liebman, and Dunbar (2007) conducted a study investigating the manner in which teachers facilitate learning in their students. The research approach was from the perspectives of students. Those participating in the study expressed that helpful teachers provide detailed explanations (21%), are friendly and caring (17%), listen to students (13%), and generously give of their time (13%). However, when the students were asked if they had teachers who really helped them, 72% reported experience with five or less teachers demonstrating the characteristics they listed. The students responded with mixed reactions when asked if their teachers gave them a chance to learn the subject matter; a low 15% indicated a response of *excellent* with this item of inquiry. The Markow et al. findings indicated that middle-level teachers must convey a sense of caring so students are aware of their interest in student learning. As middle-level educators prepare students to progress to the next academic level, they must consider the changes taking place in their students. Encouraging students to reach for academic excellence is pivotal.

Research has found that, when middle-school students participate in a high school transition program with several diverse articulation activities, fewer students are retained in the transition grade (Mac Iver, 1990). One strategy to address the challenges facing high school freshmen is the creation of ninth-grade academies that are set apart from the

rest of the high school or the creation of a separate stand-alone school (Reents, 2002). During the 1999-00 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics (1992) reported that 128 schools offering solely the ninth grade were operating. Schools with fully operational transition programs reported a dropout rate of 8%, while those without such programs averaged a 24% rate of student dropout. School districts can strengthen their transition programs by offering summer school to ninth graders. This would not be offered as a remedial program, but as a special program to accelerate student progress via accumulating credits for high school graduation prior to entering the ninth grade. In cases where feeder patterns are established, eighth-grade teachers can move into the high school to join a ninth-grade teaching team to reduce the sense of anonymity for students new to the high school environment (Wheelock & Miao, 2005).

Mizelle (1999) advanced that successful transition programs must involve collaboration between the personnel of middle schools and high schools. She posited that related programs must address the current information gap by providing students and families a wealth of information surrounding academic, social, and organizational similarities and differences between middle school and high school. Zeedyk et al. (2003) suggested allowing ninth-grade students to spend a day with those attending secondary school, inviting the secondary-school students and teachers to speak at feeder schools and/or provide mentoring to the middle-school pupils.

To assist students experiencing school failure, many schools have incorporated programs to provide extra academic and personal support. Transitional programs may include tutoring, individual counseling, advocacy, and efforts to increase parental

support. A study conducted by Hertzog and Morgan (as cited in Mizelle & Irvin, 2000) indicated that the more extensive the transition program, the lower the high school dropout rate and the higher the retention rate for ninth graders. Schools implementing minimal transition strategies, such as school tours and student-counselor meetings, experienced the highest high school dropout rates and lowest ninth-grade retention rates. Mac Iver (1990) reported that school administrators view the most successful transition programs as including the following three components: (a) provision of information on the new school to both students and parents, (b) provision of student social support during the transition, and (c) collaboration between middle-school and high school personnel to cross-train on curriculum and school requirements.

### Summary

For youth entering high school, this time of transition offers opportunities for success or failure with lifetime consequences. Research has clearly indicated that the first year of high school is pivotal. Middle schools and high schools must provide the proper support for first-year high school students to improve their chances of success. Many students navigate the transition from middle school to high school smoothly and successfully, others are lost in the maze of corridors, fast-paced schedules, and rigorous course requirements (Black, 2004). A new school environment will bring many challenges as the familiar is replaced with the unfamiliar. Many of the changes students face are tougher academic requirements, larger school size, and unfamiliar social interaction. Peer groups often change with the move from middle to high school, and students frequently experience pressure to rebel against authority.

The literature is clear with regard to the necessity for school-faculty and parent support of ninth-grade students to ensure a smooth school transition. If a transition program is not implemented, the struggle to graduate students will continue throughout the United States. Mississippi has vowed to achieve a 50% reduction in the dropout rate by 2011. School districts have been charged with developing individualized dropout-prevention plans for their school districts. The transition from middle school to high school is not the only juncture at which the school system is losing students; however, existing literature has clearly indicated that the ninth grade is a pivotal point within the educational process for students, parents, and school faculty. This study examines which aspects of the school transition are critical to all stakeholders. The data presented will facilitate the design of a school transition plan for the participating study site.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted to investigate the perceptions and experiences of students involved in the transition from middle school to high school. Programs supporting such transition are nearly nonexistent (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998a). The research methodology consists of Stage 1 of a three-stage district development plan designed to alleviate problems associated with the transition from middle to high school.

The three stages are

1. Problem definition and refinement, as well as baseline information gathering on transition problems.
2. Design of a middle-school to high school transition program based upon Stage 1 findings.
3. Implementation of the transition program.
4. Evaluation of the transition program.

The progression from Stage 1 through Stage 3 requires a 1- to 2-year period. Stage 1 was the focal point in this study and is fundamental to progression to the design stage. The following research questions guided this research:

1. What are the academic, social, and psychological perceptions of students transitioning from middle school to high school?

2. What insight and recommendations can ninth-grade students and their parents/guardians and teachers contribute that can be applied to the design of intervention programs in support of students transitioning from middle school to high school?
3. What interventions can be imbedded within school programs to reduce student attrition during the transition from middle school to high school?

#### Research Design, Population Sample, and Recruitment

This study applied a mixed-method design with focus groups and questionnaires collecting data from ninth-grade students and their parents/guardians and teachers. Focus-group interviewing is a qualitative approach to gathering information that is inductive and naturalistic. The study groups typically involve homogenous groups of socially interactive individuals (Kruger & Casey, 2000, p. 18). This methodology is an effective tool for educators seeking to generate information important to the design and implementation of intervention programs. Focus groups can provide insight into issues and problems that are not conducive to survey administration. They involve individuals in decision-making processes and glean their input with regard to problem resolution. Discussion among ninth-grade students was used in this current study to encourage the expression of their insight and understanding surrounding the problems associated with the transition from middle school to high school.

Focus groups can be useful at virtually any point during a research program and are particularly useful with topics of study involving problems about which little is known (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The focus-group approach involves a type of



interview that is social and semipublic in nature. Participants are allowed to freely express perceptions of their choosing within the parameters set forth by the group moderator. Conversation among group participants results in qualitative data providing a combined perspective of the problem under study. As with most methodology, the focus-group approach has specific research-design elements that are necessary to maintain such as the overall preparation and logistics, selection of participants, moderation of sessions, and data analysis.

The focus groups in this study consisted solely of students. The intent was for the students to discuss issues and problems associated with their experiences and perceptions surrounding the transition to high school; adult participation could inhibit the openness of such discussion. The focus groups were comprised of between four and six students enrolled within the ninth grade. Five sessions were conducted, each of a 60- to 90-minute duration. Two sessions consisted of male students, two were comprised of solely females, and the third session included students of both genders. A pool of potential participants was identified with the aid of the principal and guidance counselor of the study-site high school. A cross section of the overall student population was recruited to ensure random sampling. Established procedures for human-subject participation were followed during the selection process.

Prior to participant recruitment, a Request for Approval of Research Involving Human Subjects form was submitted to the Mississippi State University. Upon approval, recruitment was initiated with letters to the respective school board and local superintendent requesting permission to proceed with the study. Upon receipt of

permission, the school principals were notified by letter and potential student participants received permission slips for their signatures and those of their parents/guardians (see Appendix A). Subsequent steps in the design and use of focus groups were described by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) in the following manner:

It is common for the identification of the moderator and the design of the interview guide to be carried out simultaneously with the recruitment of participants for the focus groups. The recruitment process requires identification of a time and place for the group. Special facilities or equipment might be required to carry out portions of the interview that may indicate a special type of setting, which must be identified in reasonable proximity to potential participants. Persons in the sampling frame are contacted and ask[ed] to participate in a group at a particular time and place. They usually are informed of the general topic for the interview, because this often stimulates interest and increases the probability of participation. In addition, it is often customary to offer participants an incentive for participation. (p. 21)

Focus-group interviewing is often approached with many of the traditions, wisdom, and procedures intended for experimental and quantitative studies. However, the intent of focus groups is not to infer, but to understand; and not to generalize, but to determine the range; and not to make statements regarding the target population, but to provide insight with regard to how they might perceive a situation. When randomization is implemented in focus groups, it is often for the purpose of elimination; selection bias is inherent to some forms of personal recruitment (Kruger & Casey, 2000).

Questionnaires were administered in this study to gain knowledge from parents and ninth-grade school staff to better understand how the transition from middle school to high school affects other stakeholders. Due to limited existing research, items for the parent questionnaire were based upon the experience of school counselors, high school teachers, and school administrators. Parents were asked a series of questions in a

checklist format that pertained to both positive and negative aspects of the student transition. These participants rated the difficulty of the transition for their teen on a Likert-type response scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The parents were also asked to provide brief answers to a series of open-ended questions. The surveys were mailed to these respondents along with prestamped, self-addressed envelopes for their return. Ninth-grade staff were given an opportunity to answer questionnaires formatted in the same manner during the school day.

Once permission was granted by the Institutional Review Board, a letter of permission to conduct the research was sent to the study-site high school. A letter granting permission for the study from the superintendent of the city school system was also obtained. In cooperation with the principals and school counselors of the study site, a student-recruitment list was developed via random sampling from the overall enrollment of ninth-grade students. Consultation with the principal and school counselor ensured a diverse sample with a sufficient number of participants. Alternates were selected in case of illness or unexpected emergencies. Each participant was encouraged to consistently attend all focus-group sessions.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

Questions for delivery during the focus groups conducted for this study were developed using school-transition literature to form meaningful inquiries toward the design of a transition program for the participating school district. Mock interviews with ninth-grade students also facilitated the development of these questions for the group sessions. A discussion guide was constructed that established the parameters for the

sessions and 12 to 15 questions formulated to elicit group discussion. The questions related to problems and issues common to the transition from middle school to high school. The protocol maintained group focus while remaining open to additional, but related, questions as they emerged.

The location of the focus-group meetings was another consideration of the study methodology. A school environment can be overly restrictive for a sample of students. Consequently, an off-campus location, convenient for, and accessible to, all participants was selected. No monetary incentives were offered to potential participants. Preparation also included the determination of needed equipment. With permission from the participating students and their parents, all focus-group meetings were audiotaped. This freed the group moderator from the necessity of taking comprehensive notes during the sessions. The transcription not only assisted in planning subsequent sessions, but also served as a primary source of reliable and valid information during data analysis.

All focus-group sessions were moderated to maintain discussion focus on the topic under study. Each of the three groups of participants were asked the same questions for purposes of comparison. Not only were patterns sought that may involve school transition, but the manner in which the same-gender groups answered the questions posed, versus the mixed-gender group, was also examined. The interviewing procedures included a checklist developed specifically for the study (see Appendix B). The checklist provided a script for the focus-group introductions and the interview questions to ensure a systematic process contributing to the trustworthiness and replicability of the findings. The checklist was reviewed prior to each group session, and an evaluation of the

procedures was completed upon the conclusion of each session. The participants were welcomed during the session introduction and received an explanation of the study, its purpose, and clarity with regard to how all data collected will be used. They were assured that all responses will be considered strictly confidential, and the ground rules for all focus-group discussion were provided.

Kruger and Casey (2000) described focus-group analysis as systematic, sequential, verifiable, and continuous. They defined *systematic analysis* as deliberate and planned, as opposed to capricious, arbitrary, or spontaneous. Through systematic analysis, procedures ensure results that reflect the participant experience. With proper documentation, such as videotaping, audiotaping, and field notes, the data collected will reflect the true perspectives of all focus-group participants. For the analysis to be verifiable, however, Kruger and Casey cautioned that sufficient data must be collected to constitute a *trial of evidence*. The data must begin with field notes and recordings of each focus group and continue through the oral summary/verification of the key points addressed within each session. Selective perception must be constantly avoided, and verification is a critical safeguard.

Transcription of the focus-group recordings begins early with the first session. Data analysis is conducted concurrently with data collection, and each subsequent group session is analyzed and compared to earlier sessions. In this current study, the audiotapes were transcribed and subsequently subjected to a qualitative analysis with the objective of identifying themes and patterns related to issues and problems associated with the topic of study. The questions posed for discussion in the group sessions encouraged the

participants to suggest aspects they view as important to a transition program. The analysis of the focus-group discussions serves as a major step leading to Stage 2 and the overall plan toward development of a formal transition program.

### Reliability/Validity

Questionnaires must meet the same standards of validity and reliability that apply to educational research (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). The reliability of the Likert-type scale items in the surveys administered in this study was established via application of the test-retest method. A pilot study was conducted with approximately 15 participants representative of the primary study sample. Approximately 2 weeks after the initial survey administration, the instrument was again completed by the participants. The two sets of data were correlated to determine response consistency over multiple administrations. A correlation near 0.70 is generally acceptable in educational research.

Creswell (2005) defined *validity* as the “means that researchers can draw meaningful and justifiable inferences from scores about a sample population” (p. 600). Survey questions were developed in the current study based upon existing literature related to the ninth-grade student transition (Askos & Galassi, 2004; Asplough, 1998; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998b; Mizelle, 1995). Content validity was determined by a review of the Likert-type scale items by a group of teachers not involved in the study. These educators determined that the instrument items represented the objectives of the study.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The following research questions guided this study and represent the conceptual framework in which the findings are grounded:

1. What are the academic, social, and psychological perceptions of students transitioning from middle school to high school?
2. What insight and recommendations can ninth-grade students and their parents/guardians and teachers contribute that can be applied to the design of intervention programs in support of students transitioning from middle school to high school?
3. What interventions can be imbedded within school programs to reduce student attrition during the transition from middle school to high school?

Thematic analyses of the data collected by the qualitative questionnaire were conducted; the quantitative data are presented via descriptive statistics. Frequencies and/or percentages are tabulated for the checklist items, and the student focus groups are reported in a narrative form.

## Parent/Guardian Questionnaire

The parent/guardian questionnaires were distributed to 163 parents of ninth-grade students. Of that total, 26 instruments were returned as undeliverable. Respondents were asked to checkmark their selection from the Likert-type response scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. They were also asked to provide brief answers to six open-ended questions at the end of the survey. The results are reported in narrative form. The parents were asked to return the questionnaires in the provided preaddressed, stamped envelopes. The instrument was returned 1 week later and provided an understanding of how parents view the student transition from middle school to high school.

The study-site high school had 569 students enrolled within Grades 9 through 12 at the onset of the study. The school employs one principal and two assistant principals to address the academic and social concerns of parents and students. Two full-time guidance counselors address problems involving the academic, social, and psychological perceptions of parents and students. Students are challenged daily by an academic staff of 45 teachers, coaches, and band directors. The high school has maintained high achievement ratings from the Mississippi Department of Education at Levels 4 and 5 for the last 6 years preceding this study. All staff held highly qualified status within their respective teaching fields, as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The student body was comprised of 48% females and 52% males. European American students represented 51% of the school population, African Americans totaled 47%, Hispanics 2%, and Asians comprised 1% of the student body. There were 163 9th-grade



students at the time of the study, 151 enrolled within the 10th grade, 123 within the 11th grade, and 132 students within the 12th grade.

The parent/guardian survey provided valuable insight into the issues addressed by Research Question 1, which asked, “What are the academic, social, and psychological perceptions of students transitioning from middle school to high school?” The survey focused on the concerns students expressed to parents prior to making the subject transition, as well as on how students are currently adjusting since the initial transition. Small focus groups of ninth-grade students addressed Research Question 2, which asked, “What insight and recommendations can ninth-grade students and their parents/guardians and teachers contribute that can be applied to the design of intervention programs in support of students transitioning from middle school to high school?” Teacher surveys gathered information from educators regarding the student transition. Research Question 3 was answered through both the quantitative and qualitative data gathered and asked, “What interventions can be imbedded within school programs to reduce student attrition during the transition from middle school to high school?” The study-site high school reported that 24 students left school prematurely during the 2007-08 cohort year. This exhibits the critical nature of program intervention toward the retention of students through graduation.

### *Concerns Related to the Ninth-Grade Transition*

#### Academic

Parents or guardians of the ninth-grade students participating in this study were asked in the study survey to rate their views of the student transition from middle school to high school. Table 1 reports the results correlating to the related questionnaire items. The respondents answered positively with regard to the academic preparation their children received in middle school. Of the total sample, 73% either agreed (57.49%) or strongly agreed (16.25%) that their children had been prepared academically at the middle-school level. The participating parents or guardians felt they were encouraged to be involved in the education of their children; 82% reported attending the freshman orientation and gained valuable information on the transition to high school. A larger majority (92%) felt comfortable making an appointment to meet with the teacher responsible for their children.

Analysis of the parent/guardian responses to the survey item addressing the difficulty of the ninth-grade class work compared to that of middle school found that 63% of the parents and guardians viewed the ninth-grade work as more difficult for their children. This was confirmed when 82.5% of these respondents reported a drop in grades earned by their children upon entering high school. Students involved in the study focus groups also stated that the work in high school was more difficult and demanding than during the preceding year. The majority of the students involved in this study experienced a decline in their grades since the transition from middle school to high school.

Table 1 Parent/Guardian-Questionnaire Responses Related to Academic Concerns During the Ninth-Grade Transition (n = 80)

Questionnaire item number	<i>Strongly disagree</i> (%)	<i>Disagree</i> (%)	<i>Agree</i> (%)	<i>Strongly agree</i> (%)
2	6.25	20.00	57.49	16.25
6	2.50	20.00	58.75	18.75
7	6.25	13.75	53.75	26.25
8	3.75	13.75	48.75	33.75
9	1.25	6.25	67.50	25.00
10	7.50	28.75	43.75	20.00
11	1.25	20.00	51.25	27.50
12	3.75	5.00	57.50	33.75
13	3.75	25.00	50.00	21.25
17	7.50	33.75	40.00	18.75
21	7.50	28.75	43.75	20.00
22	3.75	13.75	48.75	33.75

*Note.* Complete questionnaire items are provided in Appendix C.

### Social

Parents of the participating ninth-grade students were asked to rate how their children viewed the transition from middle school to high school. Respondents reported that the social component of high school was very important to their children; 85% agreed (63.74%) or strongly agreed (25.00%) that making new friends in high school was

very important (see Table 2). Students involved in the study focus groups supported this finding by expressing that building relationships eased the transition process and were indeed vital to a smooth transition. The parents emphasized that it was essential for students to be involved in extracurricular activities; 88% believe such activities motivate children to remain in school. Those parents who viewed the school as performing well, in terms of encouraging students toward involvement in extracurricular activities, totaled 87%.

Table 2 Parent/Guardian-Questionnaire Responses Related to Social Concerns During the Ninth-Grade Transition (n = 80)

Questionnaire item number	<i>Strongly disagree</i> (%)	<i>Disagree</i> (%)	<i>Agree</i> (%)	<i>Strongly agree</i> (%)
4	2.50	20.00	58.75	18.75
5	7.50	30.00	51.24	11.25
14	31.25	35.00	27.50	6.25
15	25.00	35.00	35.00	5.00
16	1.25	10.00	63.74	25.00
18	6.25	10.00	52.50	31.25
19	3.75	7.50	43.75	45.00
20	3.75	8.75	62.50	25.00

*Note.* Complete questionnaire items are provided in Appendix C.

When participating parents were asked if students expressed fear related to the transition to high school, the results indicated that 66% of the students were comfortable

with the move from middle school while 33.75% exhibited concern over potential bullying upon reaching high school. Students involved in the focus groups recounted stories they had been told of older students bullying younger class members. When the parents/guardians were asked on the questionnaire how they perceived the safety of their children, 77.50% agreed (58.75%) or strongly agreed (18.75%) that their children would be safe at the next academic level. Overall, these respondents trusted that the transition program offered by the high school would eliminate the need for concern over student safety, would effectively involve their children in extracurricular activities, and increase the ability of their children to make new friends.

#### Psychological

Parents/guardians of participating ninth-grade students were asked to rate the psychological concerns expressed by their children with regard to the transition from middle school to high school. Overall, the parents approved of the education their children received in middle school; 91% confirmed that they had been encouraged to participate in the education of their children (see Table 3). Nearly all of the respondents agreed on the importance of such activity and planned to continue their involvement in the education process as their children enter and progress through high school. Of all the parent participants, 80% reported attending freshman orientation and gaining valuable information. They overwhelmingly agreed that graduation requirements were explained and that the subject-area testing guidelines were provided. The testing consisted of four course tests assessing student on content at the completion of Algebra I, Biology I,

English II, and U.S. History from 1877. The students were required to pass the corresponding course work along with the respective subject-area test to graduate.

Of the participating parents, 63% were able to name all of the ninth-grade teachers involved in the education of their children. When asked about homework, 58% of the parents indicated that their children had expressed concern over the amount of homework at the high school level. However, they also expressed that students should work independently and study alone. If difficulties arise, 92% confirmed their comfort with arranging a parent-teacher conference at the school. The participating parents were divided on the issue of students expressing concerns to them over getting “lost” within a larger school. Of the total respondents, 35% agreed and 35% disagreed that their children exhibited such concerns related to their new school environment.

Table 3 Parent/Guardian-Questionnaire Responses Related to the Psychological Perceptions of Ninth-Grade Students (n = 80)

Questionnaire item number	<i>Strongly disagree</i> (%)	<i>Disagree</i> (%)	<i>Agree</i> (%)	<i>Strongly agree</i> (%)
1	12.50	43.75	37.50	6.25
3	6.25	47.50	30.00	16.25
14	31.25	35.00	27.50	6.25
15	25.00	35.00	35.00	5.00
16	1.25	10.00	63.74	25.00

*Note.* Complete questionnaire items are provided in Appendix C.

A high 67% of the responding parents trusted that their children would be safe at the high school. Those with children concerned over potential bullying at the high school level totaled 33%; however, during the focus-group interviews, students within each group reported they had either witnessed bullying or had bullied another student. Bullying is often invisible to those external to student peer groups because students are fearful of the peer “backlash” of reporting such activity. As noted, earlier, both students and parents view student involvement in extracurricular activities as important. They can not only create a sense of belonging, but facilitate student development of a close network of friends. Although the parent-survey respondents exhibited involvement in the lives of their children, the low response rate of 80 questionnaires returned out of 137 distributed indicates that further work is necessary to fully engage parents in the education of their children. This represents a pivotal theme when ninth-grade students report strong family support as a major factor in their lives.

### *Open-Ended Responses*

#### Question 1

The final section of the parent survey asks parents to answer seven open-ended questions (see Table 4). Question 1 asked, “What did you say or do to help prepare your child with the move to high school?” The parents, teachers, and students participating in this study all agreed that a caring parent can significantly improve student success with the transition to high school. Table 4 reports the themes found in the analysis of the parent survey responses, as well as the number of times each surfaced in their answers.

The majority of the parents reported telling their children, “You can do it; just work hard, stay focused, and do your best.” Students were encouraged by their parents to find old friends to “hang with.”

Many of the participating parents discussed the expectations of high school teachers with their children versus the expectations of middle-school teachers. The students were encouraged to rely upon school staff for help with finding lockers, classrooms, and bathrooms and determining when and where to go to lunch. The parents reminded their children that they were not alone with their concerns; all incoming ninth-grade students were new to the environment, so they should not be nervous about entering the new school. The students were counseled to be themselves and avoid succumbing to peer pressure from other students. Some of the parents visited the high school with their children during the preceding summer to give them the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the high school setting and meet school personnel prior to their ninth-grade year.



Table 4 Parent/Guardian-Questionnaire Responses Related to Child Preparation for the Transition to High School (n = 80)

Response themes	No. of parent responses	Percentage of total responses
Provided encouragement	26	32.50
Discussed relationships with friends	21	26.25
Discussed the expectations of high school teachers	13	16.25
Advised reliance upon the support of high school staff	9	11.25
Advised against concern over being new to the high school setting	6	7.50
Advised to be themselves and avoid succumbing to peer pressure	3	3.75
Visited high school prior to the start of the ninth-grade year	2	2.50

*Note.* The listed themes were found in the analysis of parent responses to Open-Ended Question 1 (see Appendix C).

## Question 2

Questions 2 of the open-ended questions on the parent survey asked, “How long did it take for your child to adjust to high school?” Table 5 outlines the emerging themes in the parent responses, as well as the number of times the themes were indicated in their answers. The time required for student adjustment ranged from a few days to ongoing at study completion. Of the total respondents, 80 provided a response to this question; 28 indicated a duration of at least 9 weeks for their children to adjust to high school. This time frame was selected most often by 35% of the participating parents. Those who

perceived their children still attempting to make the adjustment to high school at the time of survey administration totaled 17 (21.25%). Twelve parents (15%) reported a duration of 4 weeks for their children to make the adjustment, and nine (11.25%) reported a 2-week period. Seven parents (8.75%) reported a 1-week adjustment period while three (3.75%) reported an adjustment period of less than 1 week. Two parents (2.5%) perceived that their children required 5 weeks to adjust to the transition to high school and two other parents (2.5%) reported 6 weeks.

Table 5 Parent/Guardian-Questionnaire Responses Related to Time Required for Student Adjustment to School Transition (n = 80)

Response themes	No. of parent responses	Percentage of total responses
First 9 weeks of school	28	35.00
Still adjusting at the time of the study survey	17	21.25
4 weeks	12	15.00
2 weeks	9	11.25
1 week	7	8.75
Less than 1 week	3	3.75
5 weeks	2	2.50
6 weeks	2	2.50

*Note.* The listed themes were found in the analysis of parent responses to Open-Ended Question 2 (see Appendix C).

### Question 3

Question 3 of the open-ended items on the parent survey asked, “What was most helpful to your child in making the transition from middle school to high school?” Table 6 provides the themes found in an analysis of all responses, along with the number of times each emerged. The parents reported that middle-school teachers, freshman orientation, and friends of their children were all positive guiding forces in the student transition to high school. A total of 80 parents returned the questionnaires. Their responses indicated that friendships of their children played the largest role in a smooth transition into high school. This response was provided by 23 parents (28.74%). Teachers, guidance counselors, and principals ranked second with 18 parents (22.5%), indicating that supportive school staff can ease this transition. Many parents reported that an older brother, sister, or cousin of their children entering high school was instrumental to gaining insight about what to expect in the new school setting. Thirteen parents (16.25%) reported this as a causal factor for a successful school transition.

Table 6 Parent/Guardian-Questionnaire Responses Related to the Support Most Helpful to Students Transitioning to High School (n = 80)

Response themes	No. of parent responses	Percentage of total responses
Friendship	23	28.74
Teachers, guidance counselors, principals, and supportive school staff	18	22.50
Sibling in same high school	13	16.25
Ninth-grade orientation	11	13.75
Extracurricular activities	8	10.00
Middle-school teachers	5	6.25
High school classes	2	2.50

*Note.* The listed themes were found in the analysis of parent responses to Open-Ended Question 3 (see Appendix C).

Eleven of the parents (13.75%) indicated that the ninth-grade orientation assisted both themselves and their children. Eight parents (10%) emphasized extracurricular activities in their responses as helpful to their children and their efforts to make new friends and learn the new school environment. Five parents (6.25%) responded that helpful middle-school teachers who spoke with their children about the move to high school the preceding school year made a difference in the ease of the transition. Two parents (2.5%) indicated that the new high school classes assisted in the transition.

#### Question 4

Question 4 of the open-ended items on the parent survey asked, “What is the most difficult aspect of high school for your child?” Table 7 outlines the themes found in an analysis of all responses, as well as the number of times each theme emerged. One parent wrote, “Some teachers do not seem concerned about the students or whether they understand the subject or not. They expect the students to be independent. My child is very shy and feels he can’t ask for help.” Another parent expressed concern over the amount of socializing within school, stating, “Students have too much time to socialize. I’m stressing to her to keep her mind on education.” Eighty parents responded to this question. Seventeen (21.25%) reported that the new school environment was the single, most difficult aspect of the transition to high school. The first few weeks of school were very difficult with students arriving from the very structured environment of middle school to a more open campus setting. The greater difficulty of homework and classroom assignments was ranked by 15 parents (18.75%) as the most challenging aspect of the transition. Many parents perceived ninth-grade students as shocked to see the change in the amount of homework. Participating parents reported that, at the middle-school level, students were given timelines and assignment reminders. At the high school level, students are told once and expected to remember assignments and submit them on time.

Table 7 Parent/Guardian-Questionnaire Responses Related to the Most Difficult Aspects of High School for Transitioning Students (n = 80)

Response themes	No. of parent responses	Percentage of total responses
New school environment	17	21.25
More difficult classes and homework	15	18.75
Freedom and responsibility	13	16.25
Subject-area testing (e.g., Algebra I & biology)	10	12.50
Peer pressure	10	12.50
Extracurricular activities	8	10.00
Bullies	7	8.75

*Note.* The listed themes were found in the analysis of parent responses to Open-Ended Question 4 (see Appendix C).

Parents responding to Question 4 of the open-ended survey items also indicated that the freedom and responsibility given to high school students can cause periodic setbacks. Most of the parents believe students 14 to 15 years of age are not ready for the level of freedom that comes with high school. These students are within the same environment as older youth who are driving vehicles and having experiences far beyond those appropriate for ninth-grade students. The parents also indicated concern over the potential exposure to drugs and other situations perhaps out of their control. Subject-area testing was another concern expressed by parents. Their children have reported that

Algebra I and Biology are much more difficult than the prerequisites of the eighth grade. This was also a concern introduced by the ninth-grade students participating in the focus-group interviews. They expressed that, if they could relay one message to eighth-grade students following behind them, it would be to give greater concentration to math and science.

Peer pressure was also a concern for parents responding to Question 4 of the open-ended items on the parent survey. They perceived students often being influenced to participate in activities of which the parents would not approve. This response emerged 10 times (12.5%). The parents stated that it was difficult for ninth-grade students to learn to balance their time between extracurricular activities such as band, football, and baseball. Many believed that the lengths of practices interfered with study time. Eight parents (10%) indicated that students are often tired from long practices and therefore unable to give their full attention to test preparation or homework assignments. The participating parents also showed concern over the safety of students, due to the potential for bullying within the high school setting. Ninth-grade students are viewed as targets for such treatment simply because they are new to the school.

#### Question 5

Question 5 of the open-ended items on the parent survey asked, “What have you or the school done to help with these difficulties?” The themes that emerged from the parent responses, as well as the number of times each was indicated, are provided in Table 8. The participating parents agreed that the optimal action toward supporting their children through the high school transition was to talk with them each day about their

experiences at school. They also indicated that talking with the teachers and principals at the school can be beneficial during difficult times. The parents were comfortable with making such appointments. Daily encouragement ranked third in importance among the parent respondents. Many viewed statements to their children, such as “hang in there” and “you can do it,” as powerful reminders that success was indeed possible. Reinforcement of teacher expectations and allowing students to express feelings of concern were also found to be important.

Table 8 Parent/Guardian-Questionnaire Responses Related to Action Taken to Assist With Student-Transition Difficulties (n = 80)

Response themes	No. of parent responses	Percentage of total responses
Ask students about their day at school	17	21.25
Talk with principals & teachers	15	18.75
Daily encouragement	13	16.25
Reinforce teacher expectations	10	12.50
Allow students to express their feelings	10	12.50

*Note.* The listed themes were found in the analysis of parent responses to Open-Ended Question 5 (see Appendix C).

#### Question 6

Question 6 of the open-ended items on the parent survey asked, “What can be done in middle school to help eighth-grade students adjust to their future high school setting?” Themes emerging from their responses, and the number of times each theme



was indicated, are provided in Table 9. The responding parents believe that, if eighth-grade students are allowed to take tours of the high school and ask questions about the expectations during high school, their subsequent transition could be more comfortable. They also voiced the opinion that students would benefit from a class that teaches them how to study, and increasing the difficulty of classes, such as science and math, would give students a stronger background prior to entering the academic arena of high school. The parents also suggested allowing ninth-grade teachers to meet with middle-school students to discuss their expectations of high school students and the manner in which assignments are given and graded. They proposed that the middle school and high school could improve their coordination to better serve students and parents. The parents indicated a need for more information on prerequisite classes, allowing students and parents to make more informed decisions on high school classes.

The parents responding to the study survey desire to be involved early, rather than solely at the ninth-grade orientation. Several expressed concern over the lack of communication surrounding prerequisite grades in eighth-grade prealgebra and science classes. They proposed scheduling a night during the spring semester for the parents of eighth-grade students to meet with both middle school and ninth-grade administration, guidance counselors, and teachers. They believe early involvement would facilitate student focus and allow parents to gather needed information to make informed decisions on ninth-grade classes. A common suggestion expressed by parents, teachers, and students was to allow ninth-grade students to have an assigned mentor for guidance

throughout the first year of school. All three groups also agreed that strong peer relationships would provide a stable force for student achievement.

Table 9 Parent/Guardian-Questionnaire Responses Related to Action in Middle School to Support the Future Transition to High School (n = 80)

Response themes	No. of parent responses	Percentage of total responses
Tour high school prior to transition year	21	26.25
Involve parents early in the transition process	16	20.00
Match student mentors to younger students	14	7.50
Increase the level of difficulty in middle-school classes	11	13.75
Demand greater responsibility from students	11	13.75
Allow ninth-grade teachers to meet with eighth-grade students	6	7.50
Teach study skills	1	1.25

*Note.* The listed themes were found in the analysis of parent responses to Open-Ended Question 6 (see Appendix C).

#### Question 7

Question 7 of the open-ended items on the parent survey asked, “What can be done at the high school, once the transition is made, to increase the comfort level of ninth-grade students?” Themes emerging from the parent responses, and the number of times each theme was indicated, are outlined in Table 10. Many parents expressed in their

survey responses the major importance of teachers who are understanding of the challenges faced by ninth-grade students and helpful toward reducing related difficulties. The parents believe that, if students feel welcomed and appreciated, the transition from middle school to high school could be accomplished with far more ease. Meaningful instruction was also a prevalent theme. Parents expressed concern over the amount of homework, questioning whether the work assigned was always meaningful to the subject area. Many reported that, as long as homework was meaningful, students would complete it to the best of their ability. The parents suggested that extra tutoring for struggling ninth-grade students could help ensure a successful first year of high school for all students. One of the most important factors in ensuring students feel safe is a discipline system that is clearly communicated to all students and enforced fairly. The parents expressed concern that older students were not forced to follow the rules and were allowed to become distractions throughout the school day.

#### Teacher Questionnaire

Ninth-grade teachers were surveyed using an instrument with a Likert-type response scale. The teachers were asked to check the selection that most closely described their response to the respective survey item. The response scale ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The faculty were also asked to provide a short answer to each of six open-ended questions at the end of the survey. The survey items and the open-ended questions provided valuable knowledge from the perspective of the educators with regard to the transition from middle school to high school. This is a

unique perspective because they are directly involved in the transition process and can offer a glimpse into the academic realm that will not be seen by parents.

Table 10 Parent/Guardian-Questionnaire Responses Related to Action High Schools can Take to Increase the Comfort of Ninth-Grade Students (n = 80)

Response themes	No. of parent responses	Percentage of total responses
Enthusiastic and understanding teachers	21	26.25
Making students feel welcome and appreciated	18	22.50
Close contact with parents	13	16.25
Support for struggling students	12	15.00
Meaningful instruction	8	10.00
Clear and enforceable discipline system	4	5.00
Extracurricular activities	4	5.00

*Note.* The listed themes were found in the analysis of parent responses to Open-Ended Question 7 (see Appendix C).

Surveys were returned by 21 educators with varied teaching experience ranging from first-year teachers to those with 23 years of experience. The survey was administered on the 94<sup>th</sup> day of school. Teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire and return the instrument in a provided envelope. The responses were examined to determine how well the school prepares eighth-grade students for the transition; whether the majority of ninth-grade students are successful in the transition;

and, if so, what contributed to that success. The Likert-type response selections were ranked and reported by the number of responses matching each item and their percentage of the total. The open-ended questions are reported using thematic analysis and a narrative format. Table 11 presents the results on survey items addressing school responsibility in preparing ninth-grade students before, during, and after the transition to high school. These survey items were designed to facilitate the answer to Research Question 2, which asked, “What insight and recommendations can ninth-grade students and their parents/guardians and teachers contribute that can be applied to the design of intervention programs in support of students transitioning from middle school to high school?”

#### *Concerns Related to the Ninth-Grade Transition*

Teachers and schools play a critical role in determining the success of ninth-grade students. Teachers must remain conscious of the potential “pitfalls” and “stumbling blocks” students encounter during this transition. Ninth-grade educators are in a strategic position enabling them to provide the academic, social, and psychological support many students need at this academic juncture. The teacher survey indicated definite opinions held by the participating educators pertaining to school responsibility in the preparation of ninth-grade students. Of the total respondents, 61% reported that the study-site high school prepared incoming ninth-grade students for the transition, as did the middle school. Nearly 81% of the participating ninth-grade teachers had met with eighth-grade teachers to discuss high school curriculum and instructional practices. Parents, students,

and teachers associated with the study site all believe that the planning and discussion of instruction is advantageous during this time.

Table 11 Teacher-Questionnaire Responses Related to the Role and Responsibility of Schools in Preparing Ninth-Grade Students for the High School Transition (n = 21)

Questionnaire item number	<i>Strongly disagree</i> (%)	<i>Disagree</i> (%)	<i>Agree</i> (%)	<i>Strongly agree</i> (%)
1	–	38.09	47.61	14.28
2	–	19.04	57.14	23.80
6	14.28	85.71	–	–
7	14.28	–	38.09	47.61
8	9.25	38.09	38.09	14.28
12	–	14.28	85.71	–
13	–	–	61.90	38.09
21	4.76	47.61	23.80	23.80

*Note.* Complete questionnaire items are provided in Appendix D.

An area of great need is the development of a mentoring program to partner incoming freshmen with older students to assist with the school transition. This theme emerged within both the parent surveys and student focus groups. Teachers overwhelmingly agreed that the social interaction of students is an important facet of the process. Of the responding educators, 85% agreed that students were given the rules and regulations the first day of school; however, mixed feelings were evident on the subject

of consistent rule enforcement. Those perceiving the rules as inconsistently enforced throughout the high school totaled 47%; 52% view the discipline of the school as enforced with uniformity. The participating teachers also expressed great concern over students failing the ninth grade and becoming a predictive statistic of students leaving high school prematurely.

### Teacher Role

Table 12 outlines the items presented on the teacher survey that reflect upon the interaction between the educators and their students and parents, as well as the manner in which this interaction affects the success of ninth-grade students with the high school transition. Each question requests the response that best indicates the teacher role in the transition process, and the table also provides response frequency. When teachers were asked to reflect upon their daily interaction with students, a strong thematic pattern emerged. Teachers exhibited positive perceptions of their role as educators and leaders of ninth-grade students; 85% expressed that they adequately address any concerns brought to them by students. While only 66% encouraged parents to visit the school, 85% kept parents informed of student progress. All of the responding teachers (100%) were satisfied with their professional role of teaching ninth-grade students. They routinely encourage their students and are willing to extend extra help to struggling students. Parents indicated the importance of caring teachers to student success with the transition to high school. Second only to involved parent(s), a caring teacher is a major predictor of student success in this regard.

Table 12 Teacher-Questionnaire Responses Related to the Teacher Role in the High School Transition (n = 21)

Questionnaire item number	<i>Strongly disagree</i> (%)	<i>Disagree</i> (%)	<i>Agree</i> (%)	<i>Strongly agree</i> (%)
3	–	14.28	47.61	38.09
4	–	23.80	46.71	28.57
5	–	14.28	85.71	–
18	14.28	85.71	–	–
22	–	–	38.09	61.90
23	–	–	28.57	71.42
24	–	–	14.28	85.71
25	–	–	14.28	85.71

*Note.* Complete questionnaire items are provided in Appendix D.

### Student Role

Educators participating in this study were also asked in the teacher questionnaire to reflect upon the student role in the transition to high school (see Table 13). Although caring teachers and involved parents are extremely important, the work must ultimately be performed by the students. The responding teachers supported the findings of existing research that indicate the most vulnerable juncture for student failure to be the ninth grade. The educator responses also ran parallel to research finding ninth-grade failure to be a predictor of ultimate school dropout. More than 75% of the responding teachers view the transition to high school as difficult for students and agree with both students



and parents on the importance of social relationships during this period. All three groups agree that participating in extracurricular activities is important and will encourage students to remain in school. Of the total teacher sample, 85% agree that the single, most important factor in student ability to graduate is a supportive parent. When asked about student attendance, the teacher responses were mixed, with part of the sample reporting that ninth-grade absences surpassed those reported within other grade levels.

Table 13 Teacher-Questionnaire Responses Related to Educator Perspectives of the Student Role in the Transition to High School (n = 21)

Questionnaire item number	<i>Strongly disagree</i> (%)	<i>Disagree</i> (%)	<i>Agree</i> (%)	<i>Strongly agree</i> (%)
9	–	9.52	76.19	14.28
10	–	28.57	57.14	14.28
11	–	23.80	47.61	28.57
13	–	–	61.90	28.09
14	–	14.28	57.14	28.57
15	–	57.14	42.85	–
16	–	14.28	47.61	38.09
17	–	28.57	47.61	23.80
19	14.28	38.09	38.09	9.52
20	28.57	47.61	14.28	9.52

*Note.* Complete questionnaire items are provided in Appendix D.

## Open-Ended Responses

The teachers participating in this study were asked to answer a series of open-ended questions concerning the transition from middle school to high school. Educators have unique insight into the academic world of students. Information provided by parents can be skewed because it is drawn solely from their children; however, teachers live and work within the same environment as their students. Question 1 of the open-ended questions posed in the final section of the teacher questionnaire asked, “What type of transition activities do you believe would be helpful for eighth-grade students?”

The following themes were found in an analysis of all responses:

1. Older students of the high school becoming mentors to entering ninth-grade students.
2. Teachers of the high school spending a day at the middle school discussing with eighth-grade students the expectations of high school.
3. Additional instruction on personal decision-making strategies.
4. High school visitation by eighth-grade students, possibly including a ninth-grade class.
5. A day scheduled for eighth-grade students and their parents/guardians to meet with high school teachers to discuss the high school academic requirements, dress code, and school disciplinary rules.
6. Development of a class for ninth-grade students to teach them organizational and study skills toward a greater sense of responsibility.

7. Two days during the summer scheduled for ninth-grade students to receive textbooks, locker assignments, and schedules.
8. Development of a parent center at the high school to encourage more parent/guardian involvement.

Question 2 of the open-ended queries asked, “What skills and abilities are most useful to students during the transition from middle school to high school?” The following themes emerged in the teacher responses:

1. Strong background in academic subjects.
2. An ability to organize and a sense of personal responsibility.
3. Good homework practices.
4. Good note-taking skills and an ability to maintain pace with other students.
5. Good behavior and a strong sense of self-discipline.
6. Self-confidence.
7. An ability to communicate effectively.
8. Good time-management skills.

Question 3 of the open-ended teacher-survey queries asked, “What type of transitional activities would be helpful to ninth-grade students during the first few days of high school?” The following themes emerged in the teacher responses:

1. Allow students an adjustment period before counting “tardies.”
2. Have teachers and principals available in the hallways to help direct students between classes.

3. Have mentors meeting with the students daily to assist with any problems.
4. Have students meet in their homeroom daily for the first week to ensure all necessary materials are returned to the office.
5. Stress the importance to students of completing all homework and meeting teacher expectations.
6. Ensure students are aware that the transcript they develop during high school will follow them through college.

Question 4 of the open-ended queries of the teacher survey asked, “Why do you think it is important to involve parents in the education of their children?” The following themes emerged in the analysis of the teacher responses:

1. Assists in building a personal relationship with the families of students.
2. Demonstrates teacher care toward their children.
3. Parents can assist with student problems at school.
4. Strong school-parent relationships facilitate student success.
5. Parents are the “backbone” of the school.
6. Parent involvement reduces disciplinary problems.
7. Most students seek the pride of their parents.
8. Parents can assist with holding students responsible.
9. Parents can support school progress.
10. Understood and valued issues by parents are typically also understood and valued by their children.

Question 5 of the open-ended queries of the teacher survey asked, “What is deemed to be the adjustment period for students entering the ninth grade?” The following themes emerged from the teacher responses:

1. 9 weeks.
2. First semester.
3. Depends upon the maturity of the student.
4. 4 weeks.
5. Some students never adjust.
6. The entire year may be needed for some students.

Question 6 of the open-ended queries of the teacher survey asked, “Who should deliver the transitional activities?” The following themes emerged from the teacher responses:

1. School district.
2. Guidance counselors.
3. Parent-teacher organization.
4. Principal and ninth-grade teachers.
5. Middle school.

### Focus Group

The focus-group interviews were conducted in this study with five groups of students. Two consisted of solely females, four students within each group; two groups consisted of four males within each group; and the fifth group was comprised of three females and three males. The students were selected with the assistance of the high

school principal and guidance counselor. Each student received a parental consent form to be signed and returned prior to the scheduled study interview. At the onset of each interview, any student concerns or questions pertinent to the focus group were addressed. The interviews were conducted over a 3-week period within a conference room of the school library. The duration of each interview was between 1 and 1.5 hours. Student responses were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed for purposes of the later data analysis. Researcher field notes during the interview sessions also facilitated data analysis.

The focus-group sessions were conducted during the school day. Students were allowed to leave their classes to meet in the library for the purpose of the interviews. Before each group session began, the students introduced themselves by first name only and stated their age and ethnicity. All students were reminded that they were free to leave the sessions at any time without penalty and could decline to answer any questions asked during the focus groups. The guidance counselor was available during the sessions for any student experiencing discomfort with an individual question or response of another student. All participants were also reminded that all information shared within the groups must remain confidential. The sessions examined the academic and social problems encountered by the students during their transition from middle school to high school toward answering Research Questions 2 and 3. The data collected are reported in narrative form.

The focus-group sessions were conducted within a central Mississippi high school offering Grades 9 through 12 and serving more than 550 students. The “feeder school” is

a junior high school offering Grades 6 through 8 and serving 528 students. The first focus group was comprised of four ninth-grade girls, one African American 14 years of age and two European Americans 15 years of age. Group 2 consisted of two European-American males, one 15 and the other 14 years of age; and two African-American males 15 years of age. Group 3 consisted of four female students—two European-American females 14 years of age, and two African-American females 16 and 15 years of age. Group 4 was comprised of four male students—two European Americans aged 15 and 14 years, and two African Americans 15 years of age. Group 5 was of mixed gender—three males and three females. Two of the females are European Americans 14 years of age, and one of the females is a 15-year-old African American. One European-American male, 15 years of age, participated in this focus group along with two African-American males 14 and 15 years of age.

Students participating in the focus groups of this study were given an opportunity to ask any questions prior to the onset of each session to ensure their comfort with the process. During the sessions, each student was given time to answer each question posed before progressing to the next question. Not every student responded to every question, and students responded more than once to a question upon several instances. The discussion followed a prepared list of questions (see Table 14); however, the question-and-answer period at the end of each session often introduced unexpected topics that were also explored. The results are displayed within both a summation of the transcripts and a thematic analysis of the responses. This reporting focuses on three primary areas—(a) events leading up to the transition from middle school to high school,

(b) events that have taken place since the transition to high school, and (c) ways the transition can be made easier for students in the future.

### Events Preceding School Transition

The move from middle school to high school evokes mixed emotions for the students challenged with this transition. They are excited about graduating from middle school and moving to the high school; the move is not only to a new school, but also represents a life milestone. Although the new environment, new friends, and different extracurricular activities are, collectively, a positive change, students entering the ninth grade are also concerned over the unknowns. The unfamiliar surroundings can be difficult to navigate, even with optimal support. The focus groups conducted in this study drew information from students that has increased understanding of their related experiences.

Each focus group was initiated with the same question, which asked the students to reflect upon their preceding eighth-grade year. They were asked to recall who had first talked with them about high school during that year and the specifics of what was discussed. Friends and family dominated their responses. One female student stated, “My parents talked to me about coming to high school; they talked to me about having more responsibility and having more freedom and about the freedom that comes with more responsibility.” Another female participant identified her mother as the first individual who approached the subject of high school with her, stating, “It will be harder, and I had to study harder. It’s going to be more kids and probably more fights and stuff and to stay out of that.” Another female group member reported the discussion arising with her sister



Table 14 Overview of Focus-Group Questions and Response Themes and Categories

Focus-group question	Themes and/or patterns
When you were in the eighth grade, who talked with you about high school?	Friends, parents, teachers, and counselors
What were some of your fears about high school?	New school, larger classes, bullies, harder classes, and more homework
What has been the hardest adjustment during the transition to high school?	Adjusting to teacher, making new friends, handling the new freedom
What are some major differences between middle school and high school?	Hallways, tougher classes, teacher expectations
What are some ways your parents impress the importance of homework on you?	Checking over homework
Are eighth-grade or ninth-grade teachers more helpful?	Eighth grade, child centered, ninth grade, academic
What could you tell future eighth graders to help prepare them for high school?	Study more; be more responsible
Do you think ninth-grade orientation is helpful to rising ninth-grade students?	Very helpful; needs to be longer than a day
When you have a problem at school, with whom do you talk?	Parents, teachers, counselors, and friends
Do you think a mentor during high school would be helpful? If so, why?	Very helpful; gives us someone who understands our problems

who informed her, “There’s going to be a lot more freedom, and there was a lot more fun; but you had to study a lot more.” Teachers and guidance counselors were also identified as delivering information to the students about high school, as described by the following student:

I remember Ms. Perry, my English teacher last year, always telling us, “Well, I’m not going to baby you, and they’re not going to baby you,” and just telling us, you know, you got to step up and be ready to take charge of your education.

Student fears related to the transition to high school were discussed within the study focus groups. Students spoke of not knowing where their classes would meet and wondering whether they would have enough time to find their lockers, get books, and make it to their classes on time. A Group 4 participant expressed concern over taking the appropriate classes for her college goals and earning the needed number of credits. Students were not only worried about the academic changes they would face, but also their social status arriving as freshmen in the high school. One group member expressed concern over attention being drawn to her, explaining, “Like the first day, they were saying that you got to be called out in front of everybody. They made it a big deal.” Many of the focus-group participants had heard rumors of pranks targeting ninth-grade students. A male student participant reported, “I was told that you would have to carry books of older kids and that, if you didn’t, they would beat you up.” Another male group member was told he would be forced to eat lunch standing up because there were not enough tables in the lunchroom so all ninth-grade students must stand up to eat. Another student reported, “They said they was going to throw tissue at us at the pep rallies and stuff because we were ninth-grade little babies at school.”

The focus-group participants were asked what they expected to get out of the transition from middle school to high school. One student contributed the following thoughts: “I wanted to have a good education because I know this school is academically high, and I wanted to get into a good college that I know that I could make a good career

out of.” Another group member stated, “Mine was to make new friends and get involved in band and get a good education.” Young people understand the role parental support plays in their education. A Group 1 participant informed, “When you have your parents there helping you, it’s a whole lot easier than by yourself.” Parents reminded the students of the importance of daily study and maintaining pace with the other students. The parental support system increases student self-confidence related to academic achievement.

Parents remarked in their study surveys that their role in the education of their children has been very positive, and they would continue that support of their children during their high school years. Students reported that, when parents are not caring or concerned, student attitudes run parallel. The students participating in this study attended a ninth-grade orientation during the spring of their eighth-grade year. School rules were explained and the students were given an opportunity to select classes for their ninth-grade year. When asked if the orientation was helpful, the focus-group expressed their collective view that the expectations of them in high school could have been better explained. The only information they received in the 1-night orientation was class offerings with minimal explanation as to how students earn credits for high school graduation.

### The Transition Experience

The high school transition is fraught with difficulty and challenge and change for incoming high school students. Focus-group members commented on the wide difference between middle school and high school with regard to discipline, hallways, lunchrooms,

and teacher expectations. Middle school was strict and structured; they were amazed by the freedom afforded them upon entering high school. A male student observed, “They’re not as strict as junior high; junior high was strict.” The change in hallways and classrooms was a topic discussed within each group. The layout of the high school is an H-shape with two long hallways and one cross hall. One student commented, “No way I use the cross hall; it’s too crowded and there is no control.” The ninth-grade students exhibited mixed emotions with regard to their newfound freedom. It allowed them independence; yet, many acknowledged they were not ready. One of the ninth-grade participants commented that they were only ninth graders and needed more supervision than would a senior.

The focus-group students expressed concern over academics during discussion related to the transition to high school. Many reported being told it would be tough and they would need to study and work harder. A female group member reported an increase in homework at the high school level, saying her mother had told her that “it’s up to me to do my homework and keep up with band practice, which is like all the time, and maintain my chores and balance between home, school, and extracurricular activities.” Study time increased with the homework. The students reported that daily review was necessary to maintain pace with the high school workload. This was not the case in middle school. As one focus-group member explained, “I mean, you’re going up a grade higher, so it’s going to get harder.” Another recalled,

People telling us that, you know, they give you so much work you’ll never be able to finish it, and don’t expect to have good grades in high school and, I mean, it’s really hard to maintain, you know, your usual like grades because just everything’s different. The projects that they give, it’s more detailed, and you

have to be more detailed with what you're talking about. You got to know what you're talking about or they can see right through you.

The participating students were asked to describe ways their parents had stressed the importance of homework. One student commented, "I get the speech everyday." However, the students agreed that having someone there, outside of the classroom, to keep them motivated toward their work is vital to completing school. Another student reported, "My mom asks me everyday about my homework and if I have anything to study." Parents indicated in their study surveys the importance of ninth-grade students studying independently and suggested a study-skills course for students entering high school. The ninth-grade focus-group students agreed that knowing how to study effectively is important to high academic achievement. They commented on how the work assigned in the ninth grade forces them to study. All agreed that their grade point averages had gone down from the preceding year. The transition from middle to high school demands a high level of academic focus. All of the participating students experienced a decrease in academic achievement since their transition to high school. A simultaneous response of "negative" was delivered by the study groups when asked if they had seen a positive or negative gain in grades during the transition. They described the downturn in grades as "a big time drop" and "a huge drop off."

When the students participating in this study were asked to describe the reasons for their drop in grades, they named a number of problems associated with the transition from middle school to high school. A common theme was the inability to balance their social and academic lives. The students agreed that involvement in school social activities maintains their interest in school, but it also serves as a distraction. Those

involved in band and football reported 2-hour practices after school on Mondays and Tuesdays and most testing administered on Wednesdays; this leaves minimal time for study preceding tests. The focus-group members expressed that teachers, band directors, and coaches often forget that students are “pulled” in multiple directions.

Participating students were asked to contribute their opinions on the reasons students drop out of school. Their collective view was that, the majority of instances, are rooted in a lack of concern either on the part of the parent or the student. The students also noted the number of older students who were retained within the ninth grade and the distraction they can become within the classroom setting. Common themes associated with these older students were nonparticipation in class assignments and disruptive behavior distracting both teachers and classmates. High absenteeism, poor parenting, and drugs and/or alcohol also contribute to premature departure from school. The focus-group students demonstrated strong opinions that many homes are not conducive to learning due to parental fighting, abusive situations, divorce, and/or drugs. Students are also often forced to care for younger siblings when parents are not at home. Lack of motivation dominated the discussion of high school dropouts. The group members commented on a lack of real understanding by students of the adverse effects of premature school departure throughout life. The participants believe dropout rates can be positively affected with student instruction that has greater relevance to daily living and with assistance delivered to parents that would increase their skills and better prepare them to assist in the education process.

Overall, the ninth-grade students comprising the study sample agreed on the importance of better preparing students for the transition from middle school to high school. They also affirmed the importance of communicating to eighth-grade students the need to increase their study focus on math and science. One focus-group member commented, “I would tell them they better work hard in prealgebra because, here, it’s no joke.” Another student agreed, stating, “My first semester in high school was very hard, especially my algebra teacher. I don’t understand anything she says.” A third participant remarked that, although he enjoyed biology, it was much tougher than eighth-grade science. Another reported, “It’s different in eighth grade; you may stay on one thing for a week or two; here [high school] teachers move on if you get it or not.”

The sample of teachers, parents, and students in this research agree that the move from middle school to high school involves complex problems not easily solved. The participating school district and surrounding community collaborate on a number of tutoring, after-school, recreational, and parenting partnerships to facilitate student success in school. The district operates a Parenting Center within the kindergarten and first-grade school facility. The Center operates in conjunction with the school and community volunteers to provide financial assistance to families for supplies through the support of charities and community organizations. A privately operated learning center known as the Learning Enhancement and Achievement Program is also available through the community. This organization is funded by many private donors and provides free after-school tutoring and enrichment on a regular basis for students attending kindergarten through Grade 12.

The district participating in this study provides teachers who are compensated with donations given to the Learning Enhancement and Achievement Program. The superintendent and an elementary principal serve on the board of the Parent Center to ensure that a good relationship is maintained between the private foundation and the schools. A community foundation provides financial support to classroom teachers in the form of mini grants and teacher scholarships to support advanced certification. The foundation and school district cosponsor workshops to prepare young people for college entrance exams. The school district also partners with a national, celebrity-sponsored boys and girls club to offer after-school tutoring and mentoring for students. The district also provides transportation to the club for students after school. Mentors from the school district tutor students in academics and life skills. With over half of the students receiving free or reduced-price lunches in school, the district has developed a plan to better serve this student population. All district employees are required to read a novel on understanding poverty and participate in group discussions related to chapters of the book. By understanding poverty and its effects on the lives of students, teachers and administrators can better relate to many of the students struggling in school.



## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This study sought to determine the problems encountered by ninth-grade students and their parents preceding and during the transition from middle school to high school. To provide effective guidance and support to these students and parents, a clear understanding of the associated challenges is necessary. The study participants provided significant contributions in this regard. The information derived from the data collection will serve as a valuable addition to the existing body of knowledge and assist educators and administrators with decisions affecting future transitioning students. The findings of this study facilitated development of an intervention plan for the participating school district, which was presented to school administrators and the school board.

#### Summary

This research involved three groups of stakeholders in the transition from middle school to high school. Each group has a unique view of the transition due to its variant effects on their lives; however, all stakeholders agree that the single, most important factor in student retention is parent involvement. Parents are both indirectly and directly involved in the transition process. Their direct involvement manifests in meeting with teachers, principals, and guidance counselors. Their indirect involvement is associated with the information they receive from their children on a daily basis. The parents

participating in this study were asked to complete a survey by selecting their responses from a Likert-type scale. The questionnaire addressed the academic, social, and psychological concerns of students as they related to the transition from middle school to high school. A large majority of the responding parents agree that the middle school adequately prepared their child for high school, which was in direct conflict with student responses. Within the student focus groups, the ninth-grade participants expressed that they should have been pushed harder academically, especially in the subject areas of math and science.

Over 82% of the parents surveyed in this study confirmed they had attended a parent orientation sponsored by the high school to assist with student transition. Of the total survey respondents, 63% knew the names of all teachers involved in the education of their children. Further analysis of the parent responses found that 58% of the children expressed concern to their parents over the homework assigned by the high school. More than 70% of the parents consider it important for students to study and complete their work independently. This is in sharp contrast to the student and teacher responses, which indicate that parent involvement in the daily education process is instrumental to student success. The teachers reported that the ninth grade is an academic level with special needs. The demands placed upon students to adjust to an unfamiliar environment can lead to failure within the classroom. Teachers stress that student success is directly associated with both parent participation and student retention of information. The ability to concentrate on academics can often be thwarted by external factors such as home environment, extracurricular activities, social interaction, teachers, and maturity level.

Controlling these outside forces has been a consistent struggle for both educators and parents.

### Conclusions

Research has clearly indicated that the first year of high school is pivotal in the overall academic success of students. It is vital for school systems to support first-year students to optimize their chances of success during this vulnerable period. Wheelock (as cited in Black, 2004) found that the ninth grade is a “minefield” for the most vulnerable students. The parents, teachers, and students participating in this current study all agree that the transition to high school can be highly challenging for students. According to Haney (2003), “Grade nine is a key valve in the education pipeline and is closing for many students, especially minority students” (p. 2).

The data derived from the parent and teacher surveys administered in this research, coupled with that drawn from the student focus-group interviews, facilitated answering Research Question 1, which asked, “What are the academic, social, and psychological perceptions of students transitioning from middle school to high school?” Although this study was limited to one study-site school and academic grade level, the findings offer vital information for all stakeholders in student success—parents, teachers, and students. The information gathered from a rural, central Mississippi high school confirms that students within this state are no different from those across the United States when it comes to the transition to high school. Their fears and concerns run parallel.

A particular strength of this study was the contribution from three subgroups involved in the high school transition process. The data indicate that successful school transition must involve all stakeholders focused on a positive student outcome. Student success involves strong parent support, engaged educators, strong social support systems comprised of friends and teachers, and school-based extracurricular activities. Students rely upon their schools to prepare them for the transition to high school. Educators cannot conduct their roles with a goal of “just getting by”; the success of adolescents depending upon their instruction requires optimal education delivery with the best interest of students grounding all efforts toward that end. It is the role of the school to “set a stage” for success.

A successful transition program will involve those who have the most to lose. Schools must begin early, preparing eighth-grade students for this transition. Educators must make every effort to align curriculum in a manner that will also appropriately prepare students for academic success. The data indicate that teachers view the transition to high school from a unique vantage point because they work within the same realm as students. Educators have ascertained that students who fail the ninth grade are not likely to complete high school. It is therefore important for schools to understand the unique set of circumstances surrounding the student transition to high school. Success or failure not only rests with the students and parents, but also with the schools. Students have reported that opportunities to build positive relationships with school faculty and friends allows them to complete the transition with greater ease and success.

As noted earlier, middle schools and high schools must work together to align their curriculum, enabling ninth-grade teachers to understand the relationship of their instruction to the success of students during their first year of high school.

Administrators, counselors, and teachers must ensure that vertical alignment is implemented within the areas of curriculum, homework expectations, and discipline. A streamlined transition will facilitate student adjustment when the familiar becomes completely unfamiliar. Middle-school and high school teachers must collaborate to help students “bridge the gap” of this transition. Parents must be encouraged toward involvement in the selection of ninth-grade classes for their children and gain a clear understanding of high school credits, subject-area testing, and the rules and regulations of the high school.

The data collected in this study suggest that parent involvement is the largest determinant of student success. Teachers, students, and parents all agree that a strong parental support system facilitates student transition. The findings of this research also support the need for a strong social support system toward student success. All three study groups reported that friends and extracurricular activities play a role in this ultimate goal. It is therefore important that schools provided opportunities for students to connect. Students not engaged in school and social relationships often struggle with the transition to high school.

### Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this research provide a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge within this realm of education. Educators and administrators will find

the data useful when making decisions that will affect the lives of youth transitioning to high school. The information will enable these professionals to examine their own beliefs during the decision-making process designed to improve the transition from middle school to high school. It will also aid in the development of a transition program for implementation within the school district serving as the study site for this research.

Research Question 2 asked, “What insight and recommendations can ninth-grade students and their parents/guardians and teachers contribute that can be applied to the design of intervention programs in support of students transitioning from middle school to high school?” Recommendations for practice were drawn from the findings of this research and are presented for school faculty, students, and parents. All stakeholders in the school transition possess valuable knowledge on how the process can be improved. The following recommendations were developed from both the data derived from this study and related literature:

1. Develop a school-transition program designed by eighth- and ninth-grade teachers and administrators.
2. Survey eighth-grade students and their parents during preregistration to determine areas of concern prior to the transition.
3. Develop mentor teams of entering freshman matched with older students within the high school and supervised by a teacher. The teacher would speak with transitioning students prior to and during the ninth-grade year. Group discussion will further assist with student tutoring, conflict resolution, and support.

4. Develop a ninth-grade outreach program arranged through the faculty, administration, and parents of ninth graders to prepare students while still in middle school on the importance of academic preparation.
5. Develop a teacher “swap day” for ninth-grade teachers to visit the middle school to discuss the eighth-grade transition to high school with students, as well as high school expectations.
6. Develop a parent orientation to be held at the high school for the parents of ninth-grade students to discuss grading policy, attendance policy, and expectations of the high school. The parents would receive the student handbook and rotate through
  1. ninth-grade classes to hear and meet each teacher and develop an understanding of the environment and curriculum while having the opportunity to ask questions.
7. Encourage parent participation through letters, phone calls, and the
  2. parent-teacher organization.
8. Challenge teachers and parents to communicate frequently through student progress reports, phone calls, and parent conferences.
9. Develop an orientation for ninth-grade staff, teachers, administrators, counselors, and coaches to cultivate an overall school environment conducive to student success.
10. Develop a parent center at the high school to be staffed with parent volunteers serving as mentors and scheduling parent-teacher conferences.

11. Provide an opportunity for eighth-grade students to take summer-school classes toward earning high school credits prior to their freshman year.

This study was designed to investigate the perceptions of students, parents, and teachers of the transition from middle school to high school. Many opportunities exist for future study that will further emphasize the importance of the education community clearly understanding the problems associated with this transition. Research into the design of additional programs that will further eliminate or reduce the challenges faced by students preceding and during this difficult period is also recommended.



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APPENDIX A  
PERMISSION AND CONSENT LETTERS

Letter To School Principal

October 20, 2008

Jonathan Carnes  
Principal, Kosciusko High School  
229 W. Washington Street  
Kosciusko, MS 39090

Dear Mr. Carnes:

I would like to request permission to conduct a focus-group interview with 18 of your ninth-grade students for a research study in partial fulfillment of my doctoral degree at Mississippi State University. The focus of the research is to learn what factors impact the transition process from middle school to high school. Your students would participate in a group interview reflecting and discussing their perceptions of this transition. The title of my dissertation is *Mixed-Methodology Approach To The Study Of Student Problems Associated With The Transition From Middle School To High School*. Your students would serve as a representative sample and the data collected will facilitate analysis of student perceptions of the transition process.

The purpose of this communication is to obtain your informed consent to use the student comments in the research study. Parental consent for each student member of the focus group will also be obtained. The expected duration of the study interview is approximately 90 minutes. The input from your students could make a significant contribution to our understanding of the transition process from middle school to high school. The confidentiality of each student is assured; no names will be mentioned within any study documentation nor subsequent reports.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please contact me at the below telephone number. Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Tony McGee  
Doctoral Candidate  
Mississippi State University

(662) 289-3212

Permission granted:

\_\_\_\_\_   
Jonathan Carnes

\_\_\_\_\_   
Date



Letter to School Board and Superintendent

October 20, 2008

Dear [School Board Member/Superintendent]:

I am a student in the doctoral program at Mississippi State University working toward my degree in education administration. My dissertation proposal is currently in process. The subject of the proposed investigation is the student transition from middle school to high school. I will be taking a focus-group approach and collecting data from ninth-grade students as they reflect upon their feelings and attitudes toward leaving middle school and transitioning into high school during a group interview.

I am requesting permission to obtain information from the school and students only as it pertains to the completion of this study. Toward this end, I request permission to interview 18 to 24 ninth-grade students attending Kosciusko High School. Prior to the group interview, the study will be approved by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee, which ensures that research involving human subjects adheres to all related federal regulations.

A letter granting permission to use your school for this study would be greatly appreciated. Upon completion of the research, I will be happy to share my findings with you and the school board. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Tony McGee  
P.O. Box 801  
Kosciusko, MS 39090  
(602) 289-4771

Doctoral Candidate  
Mississippi State University

Student and Parent Consent Letter

January 12, 2009

Dear [Potential Student]:

My name is Tony McGee and I am conducting research toward the completion of my doctoral degree at Mississippi State University. The principal and guidance counselor at your school have suggested that you might have an interest in participating in a group discussion regarding student experiences during the transition from middle school to high school. The group will include four to six students and a group moderator. There will be one meeting, approximately 1 to 1.5 hours in length, at a time and location convenient for all participants.

The group discussion will be audiotaped to help me summarize and consolidate the information shared. I hope to gather innovative ideas from you as to how educators can assist adolescents in a smooth and successful transition into high school. The audiotapes will be transcribed for purposes of analysis. All participating students will remain anonymous and all information provided will be held strictly confidential. Toward this end, no names will be included within any study documentation. Any information that could potentially identify a participant will be used only by the researcher.

Your involvement in this research is strictly voluntary; you may withdraw your participation at any time with no consequence to you. You may also decline to answer any questions asked at any time. Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the contents of this Consent Form and agree to participate in the study. Please have your parent/guardian also review and sign this communication.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student (Please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian (Please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Permission to Audiotape

I give Tony McGee permission to audiotape a group interview within which I will be participating. The audiotape will be used to analyze and summarize information collected for a research project approved by Mississippi State University. I have already given written consent for my participation in this study and understand that, at no time, will my name be disclosed within any of the research documentation.

I understand that the audiotape will be used solely for analysis purposes and archived for a period of 2 years following completion of the data collection. The tape will be stored within a locked security chest in the home of the researcher. All tapes will be erased and destroyed at the end of the 2-year period.

I also understand that I can withdraw my permission at any time. Upon my request, the audiotape(s) will no longer be used. Such a decision will have no effect of any kind on my grades or future relationship with my school.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student (Please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher (Please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### Sample Assent for Focus-Group participation

Student focus groups, of which your parent is aware, will be conducted to learn more about your thoughts and experiences regarding the transition from middle school to high school. The group discussions are expected to consume approximately 1 to 1.5 hours of your time. You and the other students comprising your group will be asked a series of prepared questions and your responses will be recorded for later research analysis. All responses will be reported in an anonymous fashion with your identity held strictly confidential. Your name will not be written anywhere on the research instrument.

You may withdraw your participation at any time with no penalty of any kind. You are also free to ask questions at any time if you do not understand any aspect of the study. Your signature below communicates your understanding of all information on this form and your desire to participate in the research focus groups.

Name (Please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Letter Attached to Parent/Guardian Survey

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Tony McGee and I am conducting research toward the completion of my doctoral degree at Mississippi State University. I hope your child has enjoyed the first 9 weeks of high school; however, I realize the transition from middle school to high school can be difficult. Your school district will be working to develop a plan to improve this process. Your completion of the enclosed questionnaire will provide a clearer understanding of the transition from your perspective. Participation is completely voluntary and, should you decide against returning the questionnaire, neither you nor your children will be penalized in any manner. Should you agree to participate and return the survey, please feel free to add any comments you believe would improve the transition for students that were not covered in your questionnaire responses. Once you have completed the questionnaire, please return it in the self-addressed envelope provided. The time required to complete the survey is approximately 15 minutes.

The data collected from the enclosed questionnaire will also be used to complete my doctoral studies. Your return of the survey will also reflect your approval to use the information for purposes of developing a transition program and of completing my doctoral dissertation.

During the second 9 weeks of school, I will be conducting focus groups with several ninth-grade students to also draw their ideas and experiences, as they relate to the process of transition from middle school to high school. Ninth-grade teachers will also be given an opportunity to contribute their thoughts and experiences. By involving parents, students, and teachers, a strong transition plan can be designed that will ultimately ensure student success.

If you have any questions concerning this research, please contact me at 662-289-4771. You are also free to contact my supervising professor, Dr. Jerry Mathews, at Mississippi State University. He is located in the Department of Instructional Systems, Leadership & Workforce Development.

Thank you for your time and consideration with regard to participating in this important study.

Tony McGee  
Doctoral Candidate  
Mississippi State University

## Letter Attached to Faculty Survey

Dear Ninth-Grade Faculty,

My name is Tony McGee and I am conducting research toward the completion of my doctoral degree at Mississippi State University. I hope you have had a successful first 9 weeks of school; however, I realize the student transition from middle school to high school can introduce many challenges. Your school district will be working to develop a plan to help improve this process. Your completion of the enclosed questionnaire will provide a clearer understanding of the transition from your valuable perspective. Please feel free to add any additional comments you believe would improve the transition that were not covered in your questionnaire responses.

The data collected from the enclosed questionnaire will also be used to complete my doctoral studies. Your return of the survey will also reflect your approval to use the information for the dual purpose of developing a transition program and completing my doctoral dissertation. Your participation is strictly voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time without penalty of any kind from the school district. Upon survey completion, please return it in the self-addressed envelope provided. The time required for its completion is approximately 15 minutes.

During the second 9 weeks of school, focus groups will be conducted with several ninth-grade students to also draw their ideas and experiences, as they relate to the transition from middle school to high school. Their parents will also be given an opportunity to contribute this information from their perspective. By involving parents, students, and teachers a strong transition plan can be designed that will ultimately ensure student success.

If you have any questions concerning this research, please contact me at 662-289-4771. You are also free to contact my supervising professor, Dr. Jerry Mathews, at Mississippi State University. He is located in the Department of Instructional Systems, Leadership & Workforce Development.

Thank you for your time and consideration with regard to participating in this important study.

Tony McGee  
Doctoral Candidate  
Mississippi State University

## Letter to the Institutional Review Board

To Whom It May Concern:

The Kosciusko School District has granted Tony McGee permission to conduct research into the transition from middle school to high school. The school district understands that data will be collected from parents/guardians, students, and teachers. We are also aware that anyone who participates in the study can withdraw from the project at any time.

Educators understand that the move from one school to another can be very difficult for many students. Our school district will be working with Tony to develop a plan to improve this process. We look forward to reviewing the data upon conclusion of the study.

Sincerely,

David F. Sistrunk, Superintendent  
Kosciusko City School

# Institutional Review Board Permission Letter



**Compliance Division**  
Administrative Offices  
Animal Care and Use (ACUO)  
Human Research Protection  
Programs (HRP)  
1201 Hwy 152 West  
Starkville, MS 39759  
(662) 325-5406 - fax

**Safety Division**  
Biological (BIO)  
Radiation Safety  
Hazardous Waste  
Chemical & Lab Safety  
Toxicology Services  
Mississippi State, MS 39762  
(662) 325-4776 - fax

<http://www.orc.msstate.edu>  
[compliance@research.msstate.edu](mailto:compliance@research.msstate.edu)  
(662) 325-2294

December 17, 2008

Tony McGee  
1205 Walnut Grove Road  
Kosciusko, MS 39090

RE: IRB Study #08-310: A Mixed-Methodology Approach to the Study of Students' Problems Associated with the Transition from Middle School to High School

Dear Mr. McGee:

The above referenced project was reviewed and approved via administrative review on 12/17/2008 in accordance with 45 CFR 45.101(b)(1). Continuing review is not necessary for this project. However, any modification to the project must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. Any failure to adhere to the approved protocol could result in suspension or termination of your project. The IRB reserves the right, at anytime during the project period, to observe you and the additional researchers on this project.

Please note that the MSU IRB is in the process of seeking accreditation for our human subjects protection program. As a result of these efforts, you will likely notice many changes in the IRB's policies and procedures in the coming months. These changes will be posted online at <http://www.orc.msstate.edu/human/sahrrp.php>. The first of these changes is the implementation of an approval stamp for consent forms. The approval stamp will assist in ensuring the IRB approved version of the consent form is used in the actual conduct of research.

Please refer to your IRB number (#08-310) when contacting our office regarding this application.

Thank you for your cooperation and good luck to you in conducting this research project. If you have questions or concerns, please contact me at [cwilliams@research.msstate.edu](mailto:cwilliams@research.msstate.edu) or call 662-325-5220.

Sincerely,

Christine Williams  
IRB Compliance Administrator

cc: Jerry Mathews



APPENDIX B  
CHECKLIST FOR FOCUS-GROUP PROTOCOL

## Checklist for Focus-Group Protocol

### **Introductory Comments**

Before beginning our discussion, it would be helpful for us to get acquainted. I'm Tony McGee and I'm conducting a study through Mississippi State University as part of my doctoral degree. Today we're going to discuss an issue that affects all of you—the experiences you have had while moving from middle school to high school. Our talk today will help me collect information concerning this move. I'll ask you questions regarding your view of middle school versus high school because it's important we understand the pros and cons of this progression from your perspective.

Before we begin our discussion, I'd like to make a few requests of you. As you know, we are tape recording the session so I can refer back to the discussion when I write my report. Please speak up, and let's try to have just one person speak at a time. As the moderator, I will try to control the conversation to ensure everyone gets a turn. Please say exactly what you think; don't worry about what your neighbor thinks. We're here to exchange opinions and have fun while we're doing it. Why don't you begin by introducing yourselves?

## Focus-Group Questions

1. When you were in the eighth grade, who spoke with you about high school?
2. What were some of your fears about moving to the high school when you were in the eighth grade?
3. Did any of those fears come true?
4. As an eighth grader, what were some of your expectations of high school?
5. What major differences between middle school and high school have you observed?
6. Do you have the same group of friends now that you had last year?
8. Tell me some ways that your parents help you with homework.
9. What are some ways to achieve good grades?
10. What do you consider good grades?
11. Why are grades important?
12. Why do you think students drop out of school?
13. What gets students in trouble the most?
14. Do you understand high school grading procedures?
15. Have you ever thought about dropping out of school?
16. How important is graduating from high school for you?
17. Do you plan on going to work after high school or will you go to college?
18. How should we prepare eighth graders for high school?
19. What has been the hardest part of the move from middle school for you? What part has been the most helpful?
20. Are eighth-grade teachers or ninth-grade teachers more helpful?

21. If changes could be made to improve the transition process from middle school to high school, what suggestions would you make?
22. Have you been bullied by an older student at the high school?
23. Do you think the move from middle school to high school is tougher on boys or girls? Explain why.
24. Did your middle-school or junior-high teachers prepare you academically for high school?

APPENDIX C  
PARENT/GUARDIAN QUESTIONNAIRE

## PARENT/GUARDIAN QUESTIONNAIRE

**Please place a check mark next to the most appropriate answers:**

1. The transition from middle school to high school has been difficult for my child.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

2. The middle school adequately prepared my child academically for the move from middle school to high school.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

3. My child expressed no concerns related to moving from middle school to high school.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

4. I feel that my child will be safe at the high school.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

5. My child's high school offered a transition program for incoming ninth graders.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

6. I was encouraged to take an active role in the choices my child made in the eighth grade about classes to take in the ninth grade.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

7. The graduation requirements were explained to me.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

8. I attended a freshman orientation and gained valuable information to help make my child's ninth-grade year successful.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

9. I feel comfortable requesting a parent-teacher conference with the school.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree



10. I can name all of my child's ninth-grade teachers.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

11. I understand the subject-area tests my child will be taking and how scores will affect his/her ability to graduate from high school.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

12. I have been active in my child's previous school and will also be active in his/her high school education.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

13. I think it is important for my child to study independently in high school.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

14. My child expressed early concern over being bullied when he/she reached high school.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

15. My child expressed early concern over getting lost in a larger school when he/she reached high school.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

16. My child was excited about making new friends at the high school.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

17. My child has expressed concern over the amount of homework assigned by the high school.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

18. My child is excited about the extracurricular activities available at the high school.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

19. I believe extracurricular activities help keep kids in school.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

20. My child's school encourages students to be involved in extracurricular activities.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

21. Ninth grade is more difficult for my child academically than eighth grade.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

22. I have seen a drop in my child's grades compared to last year.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

**Please answer the following open-ended questions in the space provided after each item:**

- 1. What did you say or do to help prepare your child for the move to high school?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2. How long did it take for your child to adjust to high school?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3. What was most helpful to your child in making the transition from middle to high school?

4. What is the most difficult aspect of high school for your child?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What have you or the school done to help with these difficulties?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. What can be done in middle school to help eighth-grade students adjust to their future high school setting?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. What can be done at the high school, once the transition is made, to increase the comfort level of ninth-grade students?

APPENDIX D  
TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

## TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

**Please place a check mark next to the most appropriate answers:**

1. My school prepares incoming freshman for high school.
  1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
  2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
  3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
  4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree
  
2. Ninth-grade teachers meet with eighth-grade teachers to discuss curriculum and instructional practices.
  1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
  2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
  3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
  4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree
  
3. I know how to address student concerns regarding the transition to high school.
  1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
  2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
  3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
  4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree



4. I encourage parents to visit our school.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

5. I keep parents informed of student progress.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

6. Our school partners incoming freshman with mentors to ease the transition.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree

4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

7. School rules and regulations are explained to students on the first day of each new school year.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

8. Rules are consistently enforced from the 9th through the 12th grades.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

9. Students fail the ninth grade more often than any other academic grade.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strong Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

10. Students who fail the ninth grade eventually drop out of school.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strong Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

11. The transition to high school is difficult for students.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strong Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

12. The middle school prepares students for high school.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strong Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

13. Social relationships play a large role in the student transition to high school.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

14. Students involved in extracurricular activities have a better chance of completing the ninth grade.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

15. Boys have a harder time with the transition to high school than girls.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

16. The single largest factor in ninth-grade student success is strong parental involvement.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

17. Failing the ninth grade is a predictor of students who will not graduate from school.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

18. I would rather teach a higher grade than ninth grade.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

19. Ninth-grade students are absent from school more often than those within any other academic grade.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

20. Minority students have a more difficult experience during the transition to high school.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

21. Ninth-grade students should have their own section of the high school, separated from the 10th through 12th grades.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

22. I work to make sure all students succeed.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

23. I show students that I care about them as individuals.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

24. I encourage my students in a positive manner.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Agree
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree





4. Why do you think it is important to involve parents in the education of their children?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What is deemed to be the adjustment period for students entering the ninth grade?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Who should deliver the transitional activities?