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by

Chanel R. Fields

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THE IMPACT OF NINTH GRADE CAMPUSES ON STUDENT  
GRADUATION RATES

A Doctoral Thesis Presented to the  
Faculty of the College of Education  
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education  
In Professional Leadership

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my angels in heaven who watched over me as I embarked upon this journey: my grandparents, the late Mr. and Mrs. Hillard Jackson, Jr. and the late Mr. and Mrs. Vance Fields; and my brother, the late Anthony Kelley. Through the countless hours spent working on this study and the emotional rollercoaster which accompanied it, making you proud was my inspiration. As the individuals who instilled such great value of education in my parents, it seems only right that I dedicate this to you.

I also dedicate this thesis to the generation of young women growing up in a society that praises careless and inappropriate behavior, while shuns intellect, behaving like a lady, and having virtue. Know that it is okay not to “fit in.” Dare to dream big and let no one interfere with you accomplishing your goals. Remember: “all things are possible with God.”-Matthew 19: 26

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As I look over my life, I am constantly in awe of the favor that God has chosen to bless me with. None of this would have been possible without my heavenly Father. I thank God for ordering my steps and giving me the strength to accomplish His purpose for my life. I know that my life's purpose is to positively impact the lives of others and I choose to do so through education.

To my mother, I would like to thank you for always being there for me. As a mother you equipped me with the most essential tools needed to be successful in life: you provided me with a spiritual foundation that is now unshakeable, taught me to always conduct myself as a lady, instilled the value of education in me, and demonstrated how to treat others. For all that you have done for me and sacrificed for me, I thank you and I love you.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to determine if attending a ninth grade campus increased high school graduation rates. Over the last decade many school districts across the United States have created 9<sup>th</sup> grade campuses, a type of small learning community comprised only of first-time freshmen to provide special attention to students in their first year of high school (Chmelynski, 2003). This descriptive analysis study examined the graduation rates of four cohorts of students. The researcher conducted a program evaluation of a ninth grade campus that isolated graduation rates. Data were analyzed to determine if differences existed between the graduation rates of students who attended stand-alone 9<sup>th</sup> grade campuses as opposed to those who attended traditional high school campuses. Of the four groups of subjects examined, two groups of cohorts attended a traditional 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade high school in southeast Texas and the other two cohorts of students attended a separate stand-alone 9<sup>th</sup> grade only campus their freshman year. The descriptive analyses results showed that significant differences did not exist between those students who attended a 9<sup>th</sup> grade center and those students who attended a traditional nine through twelve campus. It was noted that particular special populations and ethnicities of students who attended the ninth grade center had higher graduation rates than students who did not. Recommendations for examining sub-groups with lower graduation rates are important implications for school leaders. It is imperative that school districts create, implement, monitor, and evaluate programs that address the ninth grade transition and encourage higher student graduation rates.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Educating 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners has become increasingly challenging. Students entered high school with high hopes and expectations, but were rudely awakened by the increased population of students than middle schools, greater course load, and changes in the course credit system. The first year of school was when the struggle to graduate began. As education agencies have strived to maintain their global competitiveness, “solutions to help ease the transition to high school, including the development of freshman academies and an emphasis on students both before and after ninth grade, are underway to boost freshman success, and in the long run reduce high school dropout rates” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 447). In November 2001, the National Center for Educational Statistics “estimated that each year for the past decade over half of a million high school students left school before graduation” (Cooper & Liou, 2007). As educators attempted to determine the contributing factors of the increase of high school drop-outs, disengagement from the entire educational system contributed to the failure many urban youth (Cooper & Liou, 2007). Researchers reported that ninth grade was a pivotal year for students transitioning from junior high to high school. According to Kerr and Letgers (2001), making a successful transition to high school helped students form lasting attachments to school and increase students’ likelihood of graduating from high school. A 2010 report by McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) described the ninth grade as “the make or break year for completing high school”. During this difficult time high schools provided limited support for students, and as a result, attendance rates decreased, dropout rates increased, student achievement was low and behavioral infractions

increased. Research indicated that students who were unprepared for high school and failed the ninth grade were far less likely to graduate (Bottoms, 2008). Students struggled to navigate in large, impersonal, and competitive environments (Cook, Fowler & Harris, 2008). School leaders were charged with the challenge of easing the ninth grade transition and implementing effective transition programs would result in graduation. The consistent decline in high school graduation rates due to the increasingly high numbers of dropouts suggested the need for urgent reform (Swanson, 2010). As a result of the declining, school districts across the nation began to create separate ninth grade campuses. It was imperative that school leaders worked to create a more effective ninth grade experience that would engage students in high school success (Bottoms, 2008). Graduation rates were one of the most troubling concerns in the American Education system. Increased graduation requirements and difficult transitions from middle school to high school were the primary reasons for student struggling, failing, or dropping out of school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

The ninth grade transition was consistently identified as an area of concern for parents, students, teachers, school administrators, and community members (Cushman, 2006). In recent years, this challenge gained interest as stakeholders questioned the most effective methods to ease the ninth grade transition and yield the desired result of high school graduation. As students enter the ninth grade with high ambitions, countless students became discouraged and loss self-confidence by the time they received their first report card (Black, 2004). While high schools attempted to pave the way for transitioning students by implementing orientations and remedial summer sessions, the problem still existed (Black, 2004).

## **Statement of Problem**

Adolescence is one of the hardest stages of psychological development for students to go through. Not only were students who entered high school uncertain about what the future held, but parents tended to worry just as much as the children worried (Smith, 2007). In efforts to make the transition from middle school to high school and from high school into the real world as smooth as possible, parents and students generally looked forward to increased academic and social opportunities in high school (Smith, 2007). High schools had different organizational structure, levels of academic rigor, student social interactions and availability of support than middle schools (Smith, 2007). Because of these changes, it was imperative that the lines of communication between middle schools and high schools were effective. In establishing and maintaining effective communication true feeder patterns, district alignment of curriculum, effective communication and tracking systems which identify at-risk students as they enter high school were essential. Research indicated that academic performance and attendance rate during the ninth grade were indicators of a student's success in high school (Aarons, 2010; Groginsky & MacIver, 2011; Mishel & Roy, 2006). Students transitioning into high school were faced with many obstacles and if they were not careful, disengagement led to dropping out of school (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013; Passa & Porowski, 2008). In addition to adapting to a new environment, students had to deal with peer pressure, increased academic rigor, emotional changes, puberty, self-esteem/self-image issues, and bullying (which is increasing at alarming rates). Time of transition was critical to the social, psychological, emotional, and educational development of a child. Factors that may have impacted graduation rates were social, psychological, and emotional struggles.

According to a study conducted by Hanover Research in 2011, “ninth grade students made up the highest percentage of the overall high school population because students in disproportionate numbers were failing to be promoted out of ninth grade” (p. 2). As a result of students being retained in the ninth grade, the population increased, creating the “ninth grade bulge,” a large class comprised of both first-time freshmen students and retained students (Black, 2004, p.43; Kerr and Letgers, 2001).

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine if differences existed in graduation rates between students who attended ninth grade campuses as opposed to students who attended traditional campuses. The discussion of campus structure actually addressed the larger matter of decreasing graduation rates because students who were unprepared for high school and failed the ninth grade were far less likely to graduate (Bottoms, 2008). This research examined whether any differences in graduation rates existed between freshmen educated in a separate ninth grade center and those educated in a mixed grade-level environment.

An investigation of graduation rates was conducted by examining the differences between ninth grade students separated from other students in grades ten through twelve and those not separated from students in grades ten through twelve. A comparison of data was made for cohorts of students who attended ninth grade campuses to cohorts of students who attended a traditional high school without a ninth grade campus or academy in order to determine if there was a difference in graduation rates.

## **Significance of Study**

Ninth grade academies and small learning communities (SLCs) were created with the ultimate goal of decreasing student absences and increasing student achievement, resulting in higher graduation rates among cohort members. This study was valuable to school districts which experienced increased numbers of high school drop-outs and decreased graduation rates. According to McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) “challenging graduation requirements were only one of the issues ninth grade students had to overcome” when transitioning to high school (pp. 448-449). Schools with fully operational transition programs tended to have lower dropout rates than schools without transition programs (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Students who were unsuccessful in the ninth grade were less likely to graduate from high school (Bottoms, 2008). Determining the impact ninth grade campuses had on high school graduation rates allowed central office administration to decide if implementing a ninth grade campus was a transitional program in which their students could benefit from. District leaders and campus level administration were able to utilize the given data to formulate data driven decision making within their district. The findings of this study examined whether there were differences between campus structure and graduation rates. This study provided school leaders with data that identified the impact of ninth grade campuses on high school graduation rates.



### **Research Question**

1. Do differences exist in graduation rates between students who attended ninth grade campuses as opposed to students who attended traditional campuses?

### **Research Hypothesis**

1. Students attending a ninth grade campus had higher graduation rates than students who attended traditional ninth through twelfth grade campus.

### **Definition of Terms**

Below is a list of terms utilized in this study when examining the differences between ninth grade campuses and high school graduation rates. The ninth grade campus and the dynamics were associated with various terms and concepts that were defined as follows:

**Attendance rate:** the attendance rate was referred to average number of students in attendance each day. Each student is required to attend school for at least ninety percent of the days class is offered. The attendance rate is calculated by the total number of days students were present divided by the total number of enrolled students (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

**At-risk students:** students who have failed at least one state assessment (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

**Adequate yearly progress (AYP):** a federal accountability system mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. All public school campuses and districts are required to make Adequate Yearly Progress which consists of three areas of measurement: mathematics, reading/language Arts/English, and either graduation

rates for high schools or attendance rates for elementary and middle schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

**Best practices:** best practices were defined as research based practices which have been proven effective through research.

**Class:** a class consists of the students from a cohort with the final standing of:

1. graduate
2. continuer
3. GED recipient
4. dropout (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

**Cohort:** a cohort is a group of students tracked from the year they enter the ninth grade, all the way through the fall after their expected graduation date; a student can only belong to one cohort regardless of if they graduate early or are retained (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

**Dropout:** according to the Texas Education Agency (2013), a dropout is a student who is enrolled in a public school in the State of Texas, but did not return to school the following fall, was not expelled, and did not:

1. graduate
2. receive a General Educational Development (GED)
3. receive a certificate
4. continue school outside the public school system
5. begin college
6. or die.

**Dropout rate:** the dropout rate was defined as the number of students reported by

schools as a dropout and expressed as a percentage of the total number of students in attendance at any time (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

**First-time freshman or ninth grader:** a first-time freshman or ninth grader was defined as a student who is in his or her first year of high school post middle.

**Graduate:** a student who graduates from high school on time or early.

**Graduation:** the receiving or conferring of a diploma or academic degree; a ceremony that practices the tradition of conferring degrees (Oxford Dictionaries, 2010).

**Longitudinal graduation rate:** a longitudinal graduation rate was referred to as a of the number of students who began the ninth grade and graduated before or by the end of their expected graduation year (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

**High school:** a secondary place of learning or school that includes grade levels nine through twelve.

**High School Graduation Requirements 1:** to receive a high school diploma a student entering Grade nine in the 2004-2005, 2005-2006, and 2006-2007 school year and thereafter must complete the following:

1. all credit for high school must be earned no later than grade level 12
2. meet all of the requirements for one of the three graduation programs
3. the student must meet all testing requirements in Chapter 100 (relating to assessment)
4. the required elective credits in all three programs must be earned.

**High School Graduation Requirements 2:** to receive a high school diploma, a student entering Grade 9 in the 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, 2010-2011, and 2011-2012 school year and thereafter must complete the following:

1. all credit for high school must be earned no later than grade level 12
2. meet all of the requirements for one of the three (minimum, recommended, and distinguished) graduation programs
3. the student must meet all testing requirements in Chapter 101 (relating to assessment)
4. the required elective credits in all three programs must be earned.

**Ninth grade academy:** ninth grade academies are small learning communities specifically for ninth grade students. Cook, Fowler, and Harris (2008) also define the ninth grade academy as a one year long, uniquely structured school program which provides ninth graders with the support and resources needed.

**Ninth grade bulge:** an expression which described the increase in the number of ninth graders who did not advance to the next grade (Black, 2004; Kerr and Letgers, 2001); thus, resulting in a decline in the amount of tenth grade students.

**Ninth grade campus:** a ninth grade campus is a small learning community that included a separate physical facility that is uniquely designed for only ninth grade students.

**Repeater freshman or ninth grader:** a student who has not earned enough high school credits to be classified as a tenth grader or a high school sophomore.

**Retention rate:** a retention rate is the percentage of students who did not earn enough credits to be promoted to the next grade level. The annual retention rate indicates the percentage of students who begin a school year in the same grade level as they attending during the previous year.

**Small Learning Community:** dividing the larger population of a school

into smaller, homogenous groups. Small learning communities also refer to houses or schools-within-schools, magnet programs, and career academies. These learning communities share the basic understanding of small unit schooling.

**Transition:** the transition from middle school into high school was the movement, passage, or progression from the eighth grade to the ninth grade.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The following topics were examined in order to accurately define the ninth grade experience: (a) transitional programs: ninth grade academies and campuses, (b) the ninth grade transition, (c) student retention; and (d) graduation rates.

A report by McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) described the ninth grade as “the make or break year for completing high school” (p. 447). Many studies collected data on the topic of school transitions. Approximately one in every three eighth-grade students in the United States did not graduate, and nearly half of Black and Latino students did not graduate (Lee & Orfield, 2006). Arguably, eighth and ninth grades were defining times for teenagers; students tended to experience difficulties adjusting to this transition. Students struggled to navigate in large, impersonal, and competitive environments (Cook, Fowler & Harris, 2008; Dillion, 2008). Educators were charged with easing the ninth grade transition and implementing effective transition programs which resulted in graduation. It was imperative that educators explored every possible option to increase student achievement for students transitioning from eighth to ninth grade (Kerr & Letgers, 2001). Many strategies have been determined as best practices which have determined effective ninth grade transition programs and the completion of high school. Some examples included: the school-within-a-school method, a separate ninth grade campus, and comprehensive transition programs (Hanover, 2011; Kerr & Letgers, 2001). It was undetermined which method was most effective for transitioning students; however, research suggested that students who participated in transitions that actively

involve students, parents, and staff members were less likely to drop out of high school even when demographic and other information was held constant (Smith, 2007).

### **Transitional Programs: Ninth Grade Academies and Campuses**

Kerri Kerr and Nettie Letgers (2001) examined reform practices which the state of Maryland used to ease the ninth grade transition and promote ninth grade success. They found that a diverse set of practices were used across the state of Maryland sample.

Among the practices that Kerr and Letgers (2001) investigated were:

1. student-centered instructional practices, such as cooperative learning or student-directed projects or activities, used an average of once a week or more;
2. extended or block class periods;
3. special curriculum or classes just for ninth graders;
4. homeroom or advisory groups for ninth graders;
5. an extra subject period or block of a core academic class (mathematics or English);
6. interdisciplinary teams/professional learning communities of ninth grade teachers who share the same students;
7. summer program for entering ninth graders;
8. school-within-a-school, academy, or other small learning community (SLC);  
and
9. no use of ability tracking (p.17).

The results indicated that innovative practices were not consistently implemented, and the practices were only implemented with target groups of students which comprised less than 75% of the ninth grade class (Kerr and Letgers, 2001).

Kerr and Letgers (2001) examined the demographics of schools in the relation to the types of transition practices implemented and found that high poverty, high minority schools used more practices to ease the ninth grade transition than low poverty, low minority schools. The relationship between transition programs and student outcomes (such as graduation rates) provided evidence that most of the reform practices schools in the state of Maryland were using to ease the ninth grade transition into high school, and promote ninth grade success were more likely to be found in high poverty, high minority schools (Kerr and Letgers, 2001). When the question of whether implementation of these practices led to the desired outcome of improved student achievement and engagement, the findings of Kerr and Letgers (2001) revealed that high poverty, high minority schools which consistently implemented best practices reported significantly higher ninth grade promotion rates than schools that implemented the practices in a less sustained or widespread way.

In 25 high schools identified as high poverty, high minority Kerr and Letgers (2001) asserted that the average ninth grade promotion rate amongst schools not using the school-within-a-school practice was higher. However, it was noted that the schools using the school-within-a-school practice, and those that were not were significantly different in regards to demographics. The schools that implemented the practice began with poor performance and were under tremendous pressure from the state to reform their schools (Kerr and Letgers, 2001).



It was very clear that the schools that used most of these reform practices were the most disadvantaged schools (Kerr and Letgers, 2001). According to Kerr and Letgers (2001) the highly disadvantaged schools received a directive from district officials to reform their schools, and the school-within-a-school practice was a common method of reform implemented. While schools resorted to various practices to increase graduation rates, the most successful implemented the school-within-a-school practices with fidelity. The results from this study suggested schools using the school-within-a-school practice made substantial gains in promotion and achievement and succeeded in lowering dropout rates (Kerr and Letgers, 2001).

The data for the study were primarily obtained in the form of a survey that was administered to all public high schools in the state of Maryland. A secondary source of data was information gathered by the Maryland State Department of Education. Each year the Maryland Department of Education published the Maryland School Performance Report, or MSPAP (similar to the Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System, or AEIS report).

The article "Easing the Transition to High School: An Investigation of Reform Practices to Promote Ninth Grade Success" discussed providing a framework for effective reform practices. Kerr and Letgers (2001) work strongly indicated a need for the implementation of best practices for transition. Research indicated that the ninth grade year is a very critical year. "Easing the Transition to High School: An Investigation of Reform Practices to Promote Ninth Grade Success" provided actual evidence of the effectiveness of best practices. The researcher noted that more practices were used in high poverty, high minority schools, than low poverty, low minority schools. The initial

hypothesis stated if the school-within-a-school practice was used with ninth graders, then the transition would be eased; thus leading to increased student achievement. However, the study indicated that in Maryland this practice only seemed to make a significant difference in high poverty, high minority schools.

In 2011 Hanover Research, a global information services firm that specialized in educational research, provided an overview of ninth grade academies and their use by campuses and districts to improve achievement for transitioning students. One in every four minority students now repeat freshman year (Hanover, 2011). Kennelly and Monrad (2007) noted that “ninth grade students make up the highest percentage of overall high school population because students in disproportionate numbers are failing to be promoted out of ninth grade” (p. 2). The *Talent Development* and *First Things First* models were found to be effective models for ninth grade academies. Hanover Research (2011) acknowledged that as a result of implementing these models, students’ attitudes and behaviors improved, higher percentages of ninth-graders transitioned on time to the tenth grade, academic performance in reading, writing, and math improved, and overall student retention and graduation rates improved.

The first cause of ninth graders dropping out was listed as student disengagement. In *School Administrator*, Jing Miao and Anne Wheelock (2005) reported that “ninth graders repeatedly report they disengaged from school when they felt teachers don’t care about getting to know them as individuals” (p.2). It was also discovered that secondary teachers were less likely than primary teachers to consider student mental health (Hanover, 2011).

In regards to academic performance and instruction, Kennelly and Monrad (2007) reported that ninth graders in low-performing high schools were more likely to have less-qualified, less-experienced teachers (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). According to Kennelly and Monrad (2007) generally, the lack of communication between eighth grade and ninth grade teachers and staff leads to transition issues. There was also a focus on raising academic standards in eighth and ninth grade. Three middle grade experiences were linked to success in the ninth grade: studying algebra, reading a great number of books, and expecting to graduate from college.

Miao and Wheelock's study (2005) unveiled disturbing public policy trends. Retaining larger numbers of ninth grade students propped test scores or led to the overuse of certain discharge codes to enhance graduation rates. Ninth grade dropouts were being unrecorded or discarded in order to boost test scores. Schemo (2004), expressed concern regarding the "rising use of standardized exams to measure school performance" was a contributing factor to unethical practices (p.1). The rise of tenth grade assessment examinations resulted in the redefinition of the ninth grade as an eliminating system, rather than an individual and academic developmental step (Hanover, 2011). The commonalities in areas of improvement were found among goals, physical space, math and language arts, rigorous and relevant curricula, support, buy-in, and school-based assistance teams.

Mio and Wheelock (2005) examined how ninth grade academies make a difference. According to Miao and Wheelock (2005) the main motifs that ninth grade academies possess are authentic learning experiences that connected students to the world outside of their school environment, personalization of school environment, relevant and

rigorous instruction, and teacher professional learning and collaboration. Talent Development's *Ninth Grade Success Academy* model had six main features:

1. block scheduling;
2. incentivized attendance and achievement;
3. team teaching;
4. separate physical settings;
5. the Twilight Academy which was a night school intervention for struggling or failed ninth grade students) ; and
6. Ongoing continuous professional development for teachers (Miao and Wheelock, 2005).

*First Things First* (Miao and Wheelock, 2005) was a small learning community which encompassed four-year theme-based academies model without a specific framework for ninth graders (Connell, Eccles, Kemple, and Letgers, 2006). This program focused on curriculum design methods that improved instruction. *First Things First* strategies included:

1. small learning communities;
2. a family advocate system; and
3. instructional improvement.

The instructional goals were engagement, alignment, and rigor. It was a belief of *First Things First* that high schools and middle schools mixed students of various grades in order to make it possible to fit instruction to individual academic need, rather than catering more broadly to the grade level.

The article's last section included additional evidence which supported the concept of ninth grade academies found by schools, districts, and states (Hanover, 2011). In a study conducted in Kansas City, Kansas utilizing the *First Things First* model, it was found that "after three years of district-wide implementation, students were 1.4 times more likely to read at or above proficient levels and nearly twice as likely to score at proficient levels on the math assessment" (Cook, Fowler & Harris, 2008, p. 3). In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania the use of the *Talent Development Model* led to improved academic proficiencies, retention rates, and doubled graduation rates. The *Talent Development Model* was also implemented in Baltimore, Maryland. As a result, Baltimore Talent Development High School promoted ninety percent of ninth-graders on time (Cook et al., 2008). In Brooklyn, New York the establishment of separate ninth-grade academies at two high schools led to increased attendance rates, decreased fighting, decreased tardiness, and increases in student achievement (Hanover, 2011).

The state of North Carolina provided a larger sample which found ninth grade academies were effective in reducing non-promotion rates and dropout rates (Cook et al., 2008). Student proficiency, non-promotional, and drop-out data was used for students in North Carolina. A report by the National High School Center (2005) reported student enrollment by grade and percentage of total high school enrollment for 2004-2005.

Hanover Research (2011) conducted an extensive study of ninth-grade academies titled "Evaluating Ninth Grade Academies." Data collected in this study was used to create the foundation of productive learning environments that ease the 9<sup>th</sup> grade transition. In doing so, school leaders were provided with research based information with the goal of easing the ninth grade transition (Hanover, 2011).

In 2009, Dr. Karen Walker examined various components of ninth-grade programs across the United States in a research brief addressing the needs of transitioning students. Walker (2009) explored the following elements in regards to ninth grade students:

1. the special needs of ninth grade students;
2. the programs which helped meet those needs;
3. reasons why ninth grade was a critical time in a student's academic career;
4. methods of support; and
5. how ninth grade academies served students.

The findings suggested that successful transition programs have common components. Once goals were developed by stakeholders, school leaders ensured they were realistic, and based on the needs given by the student body (Walker, 2009). Secondly, the physical space was a specific ninth-grade wing, a separate building, or a school-within-a-school. Third, there was an extra focus on mathematics and language arts that encompassed a rigorous curriculum. Fifth, support was given to students and staff (administration and staff work collaborate effectively). Sixth, in addition to this method of support, there were school-based assistance teams in place. And seventh, it was imperative that buy-in was evident from all stakeholders (district level, campus level, community, parents, and students).

The findings from research question two suggested that by sixth grade, those students who were at risk, were struggling through school and without the chance to catch up, fell further behind (Walker, 2009). It was critical that students transitioning from middle school into high school were provided support so they could graduate on

time and possess the required skills to function in society. Primary indicators that increased the risks of dropping-out were identified:

1. poor attendance was always an indicator, but it was found to be especially relevant if the attendance was poor within the first thirty days of school;
2. mathematics and English language arts were major components of the curriculum, and especially the failing of core courses; and
3. repeated disciplinary referrals.

According to Walker (2009), secondary indicators were:

1. living in high poverty areas;
2. being a member of a minority population;
3. coming from a single parent home;
4. high mobility;
5. the lack of a support system at home;
6. parents who were high school dropouts; and
7. students who had adult responsibilities (being a parent, married, or having a full-time job).

The *Talent Development School*, *Check and Connect*, and *Ninth Grade Success Academies* were all models of established programs for ninth grade students (Kerr and Letgers, 2001). There were common features that each of these programs possessed. Teachers were willing to work with ninth graders and were trained to do so. These teachers also had a common team planning time to plan curriculum. The curriculum was not only rigorous, but engaging and relevant. Students made an agreement on assignments, rules, and guidelines for the school. While meeting the academic needs of

students, as students completed grade level work, they were supported in re-doing work to demonstrate growth, and additional support was readily available and provided. This included summer school or institutes that were held for transitioning students or students who needed to recover credits.

According to research conducted by Kerr and Letgers in 2001, more than 60% of high school drop-outs failed to earn at least 25% of their credits in the ninth grade. Johns Hopkins University (2000) conducted a study which concluded that up to 40% of ninth grade students in cities with high dropout rates repeat the ninth grade, but only 10-15% of that group graduate. Another study found that freshmen students who earned the required number of credits and had no failing grades, were three times more likely to graduate than those who did not (Walker, 2009). Students with disciplinary, attendance, and academic issues only had a 10% chance of graduating on time, and 20% chance one year later (Walker, 2009).

The previously mentioned research brief provided a multitude of information on ninth grade success and ninth grade academies. The program's practices and structures that were mentioned as effective were methods implemented in local ninth-grade programs and high schools across the southeast Texas (Walker, 2009). At the end of the brief, Walker listed specific schools and programs that had successfully implemented ninth grade programs or academies. It was noted that districts located in Southeast Texas were taking great strides in efforts to support their transitioning students. The listed campuses had demonstrated great academic achievement for consecutive years (Walker, 2009).



Thomas A. Edison High School served a low-income, largely Hispanic population in Philadelphia. The Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University utilized a reform strategy titled the *Talent Development High School Program* (Smith, 2007). Edison High School had successfully implemented a component of this program by housing the *Ninth Grade Success Academy*. The *Ninth Grade Success Academy* was a small learning community with a number of features specifically designed to help ninth-graders transition (Smith, 2007). Edison High School utilized the following practices at its campus: personalized learning community; teacher teams and team leaders; block scheduling and double-dosing; freshman seminar; a clear focus on student success; and leadership support.

The School District of Philadelphia included over 210,000 students, of which over 80 %were students of color. There were 47,000 high school students among the sixty-one high schools (45 regular high schools and 16 charter high schools). Despite the many triumphs that the *Ninth Grade Success Academy* encountered, it was not free from challenges. Thomas J. Smith (2007) reported that “although Edison met 18 of 25 academic targets, it did not achieve adequate yearly progress as required by No Child Left Behind” (p.3).

The program that the *Ninth Grade Success Academy* implemented demonstrated student growth, but there was still work to be done. According to Smith (2007), the affective development of the ninth-grade students at Edison was going well; however there may have been a gap with their zone of proximal development that was hindering substantial student achievement that was consistently reflected in low math scores. The

*Ninth Grade Success Academy's* practices were closely aligned with Carl Rogers' humanistic approach to learning.

Chmelynski (2003) examined ninth grade academies in five different areas of the country. The article titled, "Ninth-Grade Academies: Keep Kids in School" took an in-depth look at the programs that these districts implemented to provide special attention to students in the first year of high school (Chmelynski, 2003).

In Georgia, Houston County High School implemented a special program for its transitioning freshmen. Since implementing the program, discipline incidents decreased by 55%, and grade retentions decreased by 46% (Chmelynski, 2003). The ninth grade academy was housed for five years in an isolated wing of the main campus, but later functioned in a separate facility. Each campus had different needs and what works for one campus did not necessarily work for the other. Houston County found that offering the elective course High School 101, which covered study skills, time management, decision-making skills, learning styles, test-taking strategies, social tolerance, career alignment and computer research skills proved beneficial for the freshmen students (Chmelynski, 2003).

The Philadelphia school system had freshmen academies in all of their 54 plus high schools. Among the best practices is blocking English and mathematics, along with early identification of struggling student in order to provide early interventions. The utilization of ninth grade academies in schools in Tennessee, New York, and North Carolina led to the reduction of suspensions, disciplinary infractions, and retention (Chmelynski, 2003).

### **Ninth Grade Transitions**

The cultural influences upon students transitioning were often ignored when determining potential factors that contribute to why students struggled to graduate from high school. Robert Cooper and Daniel D. Liou (2007) conducted a study, “The Structure and Culture of Information Pathways: Rethinking Opportunity to Learn in Urban High Schools During the Ninth Grade Transition,” which examined the role of high school counselors in school transitions. This three year case study examined the impact counselors had on students in regards to disseminating graduation information in order to prepare students for college as well as examined how the campus structure and culture shaped education reform. In November 2001, the National Center for Educational Statistics projected that over the next decade, each year over half a million students would leave school before graduation. Cooper and Liou (2007) discovered that in the educational system urban students struggled because of inadequate school leadership, unstable family background, unqualified teachers, rigorous curriculum contents and inappropriate assessment.

According to Cooper and Liou (2007), the “opportunity to learn (OTL) referred to the conditions or circumstances within schools that promoted learning for all students” (p. 44). Included in a student’s OTL were all instructional resources and components such as facilities, learning materials, curricula, teachers, and instructional experiences. In this study, information was defined as “the knowledge derived from school adults that can be processed, stored, and transmitted into a set of actions that support and empower students toward academic and social success in the ninth grade” (Cooper & Liou, 2007, p. 44). The types of school information examined included high stakes information and

functional information. High stakes information, information which assisted students in understanding campus culture, policies, and practices which were generally part of the hidden curriculum of schools was provided to students to improve their access to gifted and talented programs (honors programs and advanced placement courses) and extracurricular activities (Copper & Liou, 2007). Functional information consisted of campus procedures, course offerings, grade-level promotion and graduation requirements, and the location of various facilities on campus.

A follow-up to the University of California Los Angeles's Equity and Access Studies in Education (EASE) Project (2004) included a High School Summer Bridge Program. This program was geared to facilitate a positive transition from the eighth grade to the ninth grade. This five year study which examined urban students and their academic self-identity focused on student perceptions of the role of the high school counselors during the transition from middle school to high school, and the information that counselors deemed important to disseminate to students during the transition into ninth grade (Cooper & Liou, 2007).

The data collected for the EASE study were collected in study of a group of students comprised of eighth grade students which were scheduled to begin their freshman year at Valley High School. All students were participants in the High School Summer Bridge Program, which included a three-day residency that allowed students access to information, experiences, and people that may have aided their transition.

The results indicated that students' perceptions of counselors were enhanced at campuses where school-within-a-school learning communities were present. School counselors were easier to access, and they were able to complete what was perceived to

be their most important role: disseminating information about graduation. However, the data revealed that students had limited access to counselors. There was no statistical difference in students who met with counselors in the eighth grade and those who did not to discuss future goals and aspirations. According to Cooper and Liou (2007) “over 90% of the students reported not having a strong relationship with their counselor” (pp. 6-7). Most interactions between students and their counselors focused on class placement. According to the study, counselors preferred to assist students as they prepared for graduation to ensure they graduated with the cohort they began with; however, counselors reported that the amount of paperwork and non-student related tasks they were required to complete hindered them from interacting with students as much as they would have liked (Cooper & Liou, 2007). Weak student-counselor relationships limited student opportunities to learn, student functional knowledge, and student high stakes knowledge.

There were three suggestions which provided students with the tools needed to be successful as they transitioned that were made at the end of Copper and Liou’s report (2007). First, the OTL framework should be evaluated and revised. Secondly, there should have been no exceptions and extra efforts to be initiated to distribute information that affected the school culture. And lastly, it was suggested that research evidence that examined the correlation between social relations and organizational norms be added to the Opportunity to Learn framework.

Akos, Lim, Smith, and Wiley (2008) used a mixed-method, longitudinal design to assess stakeholder and student perceptions of the transition to high school. The study “Student and Stakeholder Perceptions of the Transition to High School” revealed few differences as it compared student and stakeholder perceptions. “Programs designed to

reduce high school dropout rates have attempted to address challenges associated with the transition to high school” (Akos, Lim, Smith & Wiley, 2008, p.32). The creation and implementation of ninth grade academies fostered a “sense of community often absent in a large high school” and “strived to ease the academic and social transition from middle school to high school” (Akos et al., 2008, p.33). As school leaders attempted to ease the transition, they found there was little research regarding the impact of ninth grade centers on student outcomes. The concept of the freshman academy centered on the idea that students share a common group of teachers, teacher teaming, and separation from the larger student population. The research on this topic was limited to examining organizational structure or “student perceptions of transition in the academic and social realms” (Akos et al., 2008, p.33). Most students perceived academic ability as the most important element prior to entering high school, but once they entered high school those priorities shifted to study skills, social skills, school rules, school policies, and school procedures. This study was formulated to gain a better understanding of how student, parents, and staff viewed the ninth grade transition. This study focused on determining the following:

1. the similarities and differences between students’ and parents’ pre-transition academic, social, and organizational perceptions of ninth grade;
2. the extent students’ expectations about middle school aligned with their experiences in ninth grade; and
3. how ninth-grade school staff described the challenges and opportunities associated with the transition from middle school to ninth grade (Akos et al., 2008).

The campus in this study was located in a large public district in the Midwest. One hundred seventy-two students and ninth-four parents, in addition to two counselors, teachers, and the principal from the Freshman Center participated in this study. The methods used were surveys and interviews. The surveys measured students' feelings about the social, academic, and organizational components of high school. The interviews conducted not only asked staff to define transition and discuss challenging areas, but also answered questions probing their expectations of social, organizational, and academic changes (Akos et al., 2008).

The results of this study indicated that students have a more positive outlook on their freedom, while parents were more concerned with social issues. Students exhibited less concern over academics, but stated they feel the pressure from their parents to perform well. Students displayed less confidence in social components. School staff expressed great concern with transitioning students, and their lack of understanding of the credit system, the importance of attendance, and academic expectations (Akos et al., 2008). Akos et al. (2008) reported that one of the most challenging issues during the middle school to high school transition was the lack of understanding among students regarding the credit system and graduation requirements. Increased communication was needed to nurture relationships and form linkages between the eighth grade and ninth grade staff.

In efforts to prepare students to be successful beyond high school, Brown, Dedmond, and LaFauci (2006) examined solutions to the rising dropout rates. Among the strategies implemented to assist ninth graders during their first year of high school, long-term and comprehensive transition programs have been implemented. Brown et al. (2006)

argued that “all students need comprehensive long-term transition programs to help them succeed in high school and beyond” (p. 1). To ease this transition it was suggested that schools develop a preparatory Freshman 101 type of course began the assimilation to high school. There were various forms of transitional programs that schools used to help students. While some programs were limited to one-day orientations, others were more comprehensive and went as far as having older student mentor incoming freshmen students, ninth-grade academies, separate ninth grade campuses, and year round curriculums that were centered on a career choice.

When defining the best practices for transitional programs, Brown et al. (2006) noted that “programs incorporated the minimum of a year-long course and an application of skills to students’ future careers; successful transition programs were multi-dimensional” (p. 3). These programs had components for not only cognitive development, but also social and emotional development to nurture the whole student. As Brown et al. (2006) examined transition programs, there were common characteristics that programs like Flanagan High School in Pembroke Pines, Florida; Halifax County in Virginia, and partnerships between Jacksonville State University and REACH (Readiness Education for Achieving Career Heights), and Northern Virginia Schools and George Mason University shared. One very important common component within these programs was career development. In addition to having a centralized curriculum on career development, these transition programs also implemented research based interventions, freshman transition courses, and character development (Brown, Dedmond, and LaFauci, 2006). According to Brown et al. (2006):



There was a lack of research on effectiveness of comprehensive transition programs and long-range planning in terms of the actual differences they may made in students'; success in and out of school. Longitudinal studies of programs were needed to collect data and clearly measure what works best for the future of our students. (p.7)

School districts and campuses were the ones ultimately held accountable for the success or lack of success of students within their zoning. While there were plenty of schools that separated their first-time ninth grade students, not all districts adopted this method to decrease student retention and dropout rates. For those districts and schools that still elected to house their students in the traditional 9-12 setting, researchers like Reents (2002) argued that those "school districts risk watching their ninth graders fall through the cracks without proper transitional programs in place" (p. 14). As school districts responded to the needs of their students, it became prevalent for districts to create freshmen academies (small learning communities) or ninth grade campuses as the best means to address students dropping out of school (Reents, 2002). Several school administrators strongly believed that isolation during the ninth grade increased student achievement, provided a strong foundation academically, provided special attentions, and prevented students from dropping out of school (Reents, 2002).

Current research and data indicated how important it was for school districts to practice the implementation of ninth grade transitional programs as a means to improve academic success and decrease dropout rates, not to control the increasing population of its campuses. Numerous ninth grade campuses became places to house students in efforts to control overcrowded schools. By utilizing data and current research proven practices to

strategically plan, district officials can make forward thinking decisions that may cause discomfort, but are in the best interest of the students (Kerr and Letgers, 2001).

In a study conducted by Butts and Cruzeiro (2005), the school under study was a large comprehensive high school located in the Mid-west. Although the campus was home to approximately 2300 students, there was no transition program in place to aide students. As a result, first-time freshman believed that knowing:

more about high school, the classes they would have to take, directions for finding their way through the building, and locating classes in the new setting would have been beneficial. Furthermore, students need to understand the details of how classes are planned and how to identify academic and graduation requirements. (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005, p.74)

Upon the completion of the study, Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) recommended the implementation of a comprehensive transition program to address areas of need discovered during the study, and that would be influential in ensuring the success of new ninth grade students.

Schools and communities were constantly seeking ways to create more effective educational programs and better service students. A critical issue during transitioning was mastering the art of communication; more specifically: collaboration and articulation. DeMott (1999) asserted that building and fostering positive relationships between school districts and the community were the key components needed in the clear articulation necessary to be successful. Horizontal articulation and vertical articulation were the two types of articulation that should be utilized in efforts to communicate more effectively, thus easing school transitions. Horizontal articulation began within the school and

consisted of grade-level content teams, professional learning communities, and small learning communities (DeMott, 1999). Within the learning communities members collaborated to develop policies and practices for:

1. student retention;
2. gifted and talented courses;
3. student promotion to the next grade level;
4. grading policies;
5. student grouping and collaboration;
6. educational objectives and goals;
7. student activities;
8. counseling techniques; and
9. methods of evaluation (DeMott, 1999).

According to DeMott (1999) horizontal articulation served as the necessary foundation for vertical articulation--the articulation among all stakeholders in the school community.

There were seven steps essential to the vertical articulation process:

1. identified appropriate leaders at the appropriate levels to discuss and develop common goals and objectives;
2. a developed and maintained articulation committee which emphasized the importance of partnership and collaboration and that met in alternating locations;
3. an analyzed the curriculum which decided what should be articulated and shared ideas with stakeholders;

4. a composed working document which listed graduation requirements, and included what skills and knowledge students would need to be successful at the next level;
5. reviewed, compared, and contrasted prerequisite skills and exit competencies which allowed students to enter the next level with an advantage rather than a disadvantage;
6. adopted courses and evaluated programs which provided students with motivation and offered chances for authentic engagement; and
7. an evaluated articulation agreement at least every two years (DeMott, 1999).

### **Student Retention**

Graduation rates and the educational experiences of ninth graders cannot be examined without exploring student retention, as it drastically impacted whether students graduated with their cohort. The available literature referred to students retained in the ninth grade as the “ninth grade bulge” (Black, 2004, p. 43). As a result of students being retained in the ninth grade, fewer students were promoted to the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades (Black, 2004); therefore, graduation rates were impacted. Emerging assumptions regarding student retention, along with research indicated that the largest amount of students was retained in high school their ninth grade year (Engel & Stone, 2007). Students ran into extreme academic trouble and often behavioral trouble during their first semester and therefore the ninth grade became a “holding tank” (Black, 2004, p.43). According to Black (2004) “the bulge [in the ninth grade] indicated that many students were retained in the ninth grade and fewer went on to the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades” (p. 43). Unfortunately, this had a direct impact on the decreased graduation rates.

School districts across the United States were struggling not only to determine the most effective strategies to keep students engaged and motivated to stay in school, but they were also facing pressure from state agencies and the U.S. Department of Education's accountability rating systems. While solving the problem of the ninth grade bulge, the following year schools were charged with meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind Act (2001).

Lohman, Myers, Newman, Newman, and Smith (2000) conducted a study which examined the factors that contributed to the successful academic performance of transitioning students. The "increased choices, changes, and responsibilities in the adolescent's academic and social worlds" were leading factors that influenced a first-time ninth grade student (Lohman et al., 2000, p. 388). Student retention in the ninth grade became a key indicator of academic success in high school. The components below provided a framework for the study:

1. the relevant microsystems that affected adolescents' motivation and academic performance in the transition from eighth to ninth grade;
2. the key elements of those systems that either helped sustain or detract from academic motivation and performance;
3. factors which differentiated students who were performing well in the ninth grade from those who were having academic difficulties; and
4. the strategies used by students to cope with the new and competing demands across settings that accompany the transition to high school. (Lohman et al., 2000, p. 388)

The social support that a student received, or lacked was extremely important as it played a major role in the academic success of a student. Students without social support at home, or that lacked the environment of communication with their parents, turned to their peers for support and advice (Lohman et al., 2000). Lohman et al. (2000) investigated the perceptions of twenty-nine high-poverty, high-minority students enrolled in Ohio State University's *Young Scholars Program* (YSP) by conducting face to face interviews. The topics discussed in this investigation were:

1. attributes of the eighth grade to ninth grade transition;
2. supporters of the academic success of students;
3. challenges transitioning students faced;
4. who students turned to when challenges were presented;
5. the characteristics of a successful student (Lohman, et al., 2000).

The results included responses pertaining to relationships with teachers, the actual “transitioning” experience, and adjusting to a new school. Those challenges, along with trying to nurture an active social life during adolescence, can be detrimental for a student in the ninth grade (Lohman, et al., 2000). Whether teachers and staff provided more support for struggling students running the risk of being retained in the ninth grade was far more important than realized. According to Lohman, et al. (2000) “the role of teachers in increasing, maintain, or undermining academic motivation appeared to be quite important. . .” (p.406). The findings of this study confirmed that the transition to ninth grade was a tremendous challenge and obstacle to overcome. Various coping strategies were needed to handle the environment, social and academic changes and challenges first-time students faced (Lohman et al., 2000). It was necessary that educators kept at the

forefront of their minds that the teachers and administrators who students interacted with must support student performance, as well as provide a safe, secure environment conducive to learning while teaching students.

### **Graduation Rates**

When determining the factors that contributed to the increasing number of high school drop-outs, Balfonz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007) investigated “Preventing Student Disengagement and Keeping Students on the Graduation Path in Urban Middle-Grade Schools: Early Identification and Effective Interventions.” Their discussion addressed the larger matter of decreased graduation rates. Students who eventually dropped-out of school became disengaged before they actually dropped-out (Balfonz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007). The decisions that students made to misbehave, to not attend school, and to exhibit low effort academically were considered behavioral indicators of strong disengagements and predictive of dropping out of school. Conducting research, developing programs, and conceptual work were emphasized in this article as the graduation pathway was paved. The research Balfonz et al. (2007) conducted attempted to identify the following:

1. when during middle school grades did serious student disengagement from school occur;
2. possible indicators schools could use to identify students who were beginning to disengage; and
3. effective preventions and interventions that could be implemented in schools.

Balfanz et al. (2007) discussed the roots of disengagement from secondary school and prior efforts at early identification of students who were falling off the graduation path. They found that retention at any grade level tended to have a negative impact on the odds of a student making it through the ninth grade. As they developed indicators of disengagement and examined their impact on graduation, four guiding questions were analyzed. The outcome variable used was whether the subject cohort graduated on time or within one extra year of their expected graduation date. The four predictor variables included: academic performance, misbehavior, attendance, and special populations. The warning flags attendance, academic achievement, suspensions, behavior grades, and special populations were discussed as they directly contributed to graduation warning flags. It was concluded that students needed to attend school regularly, behave, and try to succeed in school to keep them on the right pathway to graduation (Balfanz et al., 2007). Balfanz et al. (2007) argued that the graduation rate crisis intensified, and attending chaotic, disorganized, and under-resourced schools characterized by high levels of teacher turnovers and vacancies all combined to promote student disengagement, in addition to living in distressed neighborhoods.

Among the many problems in the American education system, graduation rates were one of the most troubling and pressing issues. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) discussed the impact ninth grade had on graduation rates in “The Importance of the Ninth Grade on High School Graduation Rates and Student Success in High School.” During their research, McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) found that:

increased graduation requirements and rocky transitions from middle school to high school seem to comprise a majority of reasons for students struggling,



failing, and dropping out. Since high school graduation requirements and the transition to high school both involve the ninth grade, a lot of research has focused on the importance of the ninth grade year. (p. 447)

With the increased graduation requirements, educators in federal, state, and local arenas felt the pressure to increase graduation rates so that students could compete on global platforms. While discussing some of the solutions to ease the transition to the ninth-grade, McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) examined the freshman academy and its differences from traditional high schools. Transitioning students found it difficult to adapt to the substantial social and academic differences in high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). It was noted that a major area of concern was that students did not truly understand the new credit system.

“The freshman academy can take many physical forms including center, wings, and houses, but all have the same goal, which is to separate freshman to help ease the transition to high school, and increase the number of successful ninth grade students” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 451). This allowed for ninth grade students to receive more individual attention. Some of the improvements that resulted from implementing ninth grade academies were increased attendance rates, decreased behavioral infractions, higher teacher morale, and more parental contact. Simply creating a ninth grade academy did not magically solve the problem of graduation rates, because “the freshman academy is more of a philosophy than just a school building” (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 452). Although the issue of graduation rates was not only a concern at the ninth grade level, researchers argued that this was the year that could make the biggest impact if resources were available and interventions were in place

early. As McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) discussed, “transition difficulties coupled with increased state graduation requirements are only a few of the hurdles that ninth grade students in particular have to overcome” (pp. 454-455).

Gene Bottoms (2008) found that “students who were unprepared for high school and failed in the ninth grade are far less likely to graduate” (Bottoms, 2008, p. 1).

Because the ninth grade was such an influential year, education agencies and school officials set out to redesign that experience to increase graduation rates. In “Redesigning the Ninth-Grade Experience: Reduce Failure, Improve Achievement and Increase High School Graduation Rates,” Bottoms (2008) argued that “improving student achievement in the ninth grade can lead to improved graduation rates and improved readiness for college and careers” (Bottoms, 2008, p. 1). In redesigning the ninth grade experience Bottoms (2008) suggested best practices for a more effective ninth-grade experience. Some of the best practices included: early orientation and preparation in middle school, specialized ninth-grade courses, the ninth grade academy, a no-zero policy, and providing guidance, support and counseling. One of the new trends in education was student engagement and its benefits (Bottoms, 2008). Researchers like Bottoms (2008) supported the notion that while dealing with 21<sup>st</sup> century learners authentic student engagement led to student success. Bottoms (2008) went so far to suggest that “. . . in an era of rising workplace requirements, a high school education is more important than ever before. Yet, too many students do not graduate from high school. . .” (p. 3). Along with the notion of student engagement came the idea of inspiring and motivating students to succeed. Some factors that inspired and motivated students were goals and purposes, the exploration of career and educational options, personal responsibility, relevant curriculum, and high

expectations (Bottoms, 2008). Ultimately, what was at stake was the success of future generations. As Bottoms (2008) explored the components of an effective ninth-grade experience and claimed that aligning middle school courses to high school courses, following a model schedule which consisted of block scheduling, providing catch-up courses for English/language arts and mathematics, building in career exploratory courses, and ensuring that students had support in the ninth grade would decrease drop-out rates. As research indicated, students usually drop out of school as a result of disengagement which has progressed over years. Displaying characteristics like not completing satisfactory work, obsessive absences, loss of credit for multiple courses communicated to students that they would not graduate with their cohort, thus leading to them dropping out of school (Bottoms, 2008). Bottoms (2008) stated that “following advisement and support options can connect students to an adult to help them stay on track in high school” (p. 12). School leaders were advised to implement credit recovery programs, allow extra help and time, utilize parents as educational partners, enlist teachers as mentors and advisors, and implement a no-zero policy (Bottoms, 2008). In the interest of students, increased graduation rates would be the ultimate indicator of a successful high school experience.

In an extensive study that examined the achievement loss associated with transitioning it was determined that a correlation existed between transitions and the percentage of students that dropped out of high school (Alspaugh, 1998). Alspaugh (1998) found that “all three school groups in the study experienced a mean achievement loss in the transition to high school” (p. 22). The percentage of dropouts over a five year

period for students in grades nine through twelve were applied in the study. The findings of this investigation implied the following:

1. students transitioning to high school experienced a greater achievement loss than students transitioning at the primary level;
2. schools with multiple transitions had higher dropout rates than schools with one transition;
3. the lack of stability and the number of adjustments students had to make directly impacted their achievement (Alspaugh, 1998).

According to Alspaugh (1998) “students placed in relatively small cohort groups for long spans of time tended to experience more desirable educational outcomes” (p. 25).

One of the primary indicators of whether a district and its schools were being successful in educating students was their graduation rate. The stakeholders and students had the right to feel comfortable and confident that the education students were being provided with was preparing them to not only graduate, but be productive post high school. In a recent study conducted by Beckert, Strom, and Strom (2011), they found that the lack of a common instrument to measure student preparedness for high school graduation across the country was an immense issue. The fallacious reporting of data and “permitting states to establish their own formulas has led to the exaggeration of the proportion of students graduating and an underestimate of those who dropout” (Beckert, et al., 2011, p. 8). Only half of the nation’s urban students in schools in the 50 largest cities across the country completed high school (Beckert, et al., 2011). Within this number, it was unknown whether students graduated with their ninth grade cohort, and it was alarming that this number also fell almost 20 % behind the national average. When

distressing figures were brought under the microscope, the blame game began. Teachers and administrators began to blame parental involvement as a contributing factor to the declining graduation rates and loss of student achievement, and parents began to blame the schools. Placing the blame on one another created a culture of distrust among urban schools at a time when collaborating and communication was most important. Arguably, public perception became a key component tied into how well a campus performed (Beckert, et al., 2011). Some parents debated that “underperforming schools were half as likely as excelling schools to inform families about student performance, detect study skills needing attention, provide ways to engage parents more in education, and identify requirements for graduation and admission to higher education” (Beckert, et al., 2011, p. 11). Consistent collaboration and proactive --not re-active, communication between all stakeholders in the school community was imperative because educators must be knowledgeable about how the community perceived the learning environments they fostered. Granting students the opportunity to voice their perceptions of learning allowed the opportunity to improve the “quality of experience in the classroom” (Beckert, et al., 2011, p. 11). There were varied forms of collecting data from students and stakeholders, but one common form was the Gallup poll, which allowed participators to submit their responses anonymously. Though surveys and polls were the most practical methods for collecting such large masses of data, it created the question: what was done with the data after it was collected and how were changes implemented to reflect the input of stakeholders? Educating 21<sup>st</sup> century learners was increasingly difficult, but educators were not left to complete this task alone. Any decision making committees must utilize the recommendations of researchers and stakeholders to create educational reform.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

Chapter 3 included an explanation of the quantitative research methodology employed in this study to determine whether a difference existed between stand-alone ninth grade campuses and high school graduation rates. The research methodology included information regarding the participants in this study, how they were selected, a description of the comparison groups of students and their formation, the instrumentation, the obtaining and usage of archival data, and the methods of data analysis. A high school in southeast Texas was used in order to investigate the effect on graduation rates. The careful examination of the increasing failure rates among first time freshmen assisted high school teachers and administrators with the appropriate strategies to overcome the increased failure rates and decreased graduation rates. The conclusion of this chapter explained the researcher's role in each of the following: maintaining confidentiality, data collection and analysis, and setting.

Based on the research examined, it was unknown how and to what extent ninth grade campuses impacted graduation rates. The complexities that accompanied the ninth grade transition "resulted in flagging academic performance, increased dropout rates, and reduced on-time graduation" (Smith, 2007, p. 1). As a result, this became the primary reason for the establishment of freshman campuses. Even though current findings suggested that ninth grade campuses improved student achievement in general, there was a gap in the literature that determined whether student graduation rates were increased.

## **Research Design**

In this descriptive analysis study intact groups were used with no manipulation of independent variables. A total of four cohorts of students were examined. Two of those cohorts consisted of students who attended a traditional campus during all four years of high school and two cohorts consisted of students who attended a ninth grade campus during the ninth grade. The crucial concern regarding factors that impacted graduation rates were addressed by determining whether any differences existed between graduation rates and separating first-time ninth grade students from tenth through twelfth grade students. Archival data was used while conducting this study and participants were not randomly selected. The researcher deliberately selected students that attended Jackson High School Ninth Grade Campus and Jackson High School.

## **Research Question**

Descriptive analyses were used to answer the following research question:

1. Do differences exist in graduation rates between students who attended ninth grade campuses as opposed to students who attended traditional campuses?

## **Setting**

Data were collected with regard to the dependent variables in this study of one high school located in Harris County, Texas which resided in Region 4 of the Texas educational service centers. The student population consisted of approximately 1,100 to 1,700 first-time ninth-grade students. Kelley Independent School District created a Jackson Ninth Grade Campus for the freshmen students of Jackson High School. After approximately three years of operation, the Kelley Independent School District school

board decided to close Jackson Ninth Grade Campus allowing freshmen students to attend Jackson High School with other grade levels again.

### **The Traditional High School**

In 1976, Green High School freshmen and sophomore students moved into a new building called Green High South which is known today as Jackson High School. Once Green High South became a four year high school it changed its name to Jackson High School. Located in southeast Texas, Jackson High School served just over 4,000 students. Over 40% of the students at this campus qualified for free or reduced lunch. The majority of the ethnic distribution at Jackson High School consisted of African American and Hispanic students. Approximately 40% of the students on this campus were considered economically disadvantaged, and Jackson High School had what was considered to be a high mobility rate of over 20%.

### **The Ninth Grade Campus**

Jackson High School Ninth Grade Campus was created to house first-time freshman students. In January 2004, students who attended Caines Middle School moved into a brand new facility. The original Caines Middle school which opened in 1971 became Jackson High School Ninth Grade Campus. Opening in the spring of 2004, Jackson High School Ninth Grade Campus was open until 2007. Beginning in the fall of 2007 all students in grade levels nine through twelve returned to Jackson High School (the main campus; traditional grade levels nine through twelve). Jackson High School Ninth Grade Campus was only open for three complete academic school years and one semester. After a year of comprehensive planning and developing, what was formally known as Jackson High School Ninth Grade Campus became Kelly Independent School



District's first middle school of choice. The ninth grade students who would have attended Jackson High School Ninth Campus re-joined students at Jackson High School.

### **Subjects**

The population for this study was comprised of ninth grade students from one metropolitan area high school located in southeast Texas for four consecutive years. The participants in this sample consisted of ninth grade students entering in:

1. 2005-2006 (cohort 1)/class of 2009;
2. 2006-2007 (cohort 2)/class of 2010;
3. 2007-2008 (cohort 3)/class of 2011; and
4. 2008-2009 (cohort 4)/class of 2012.

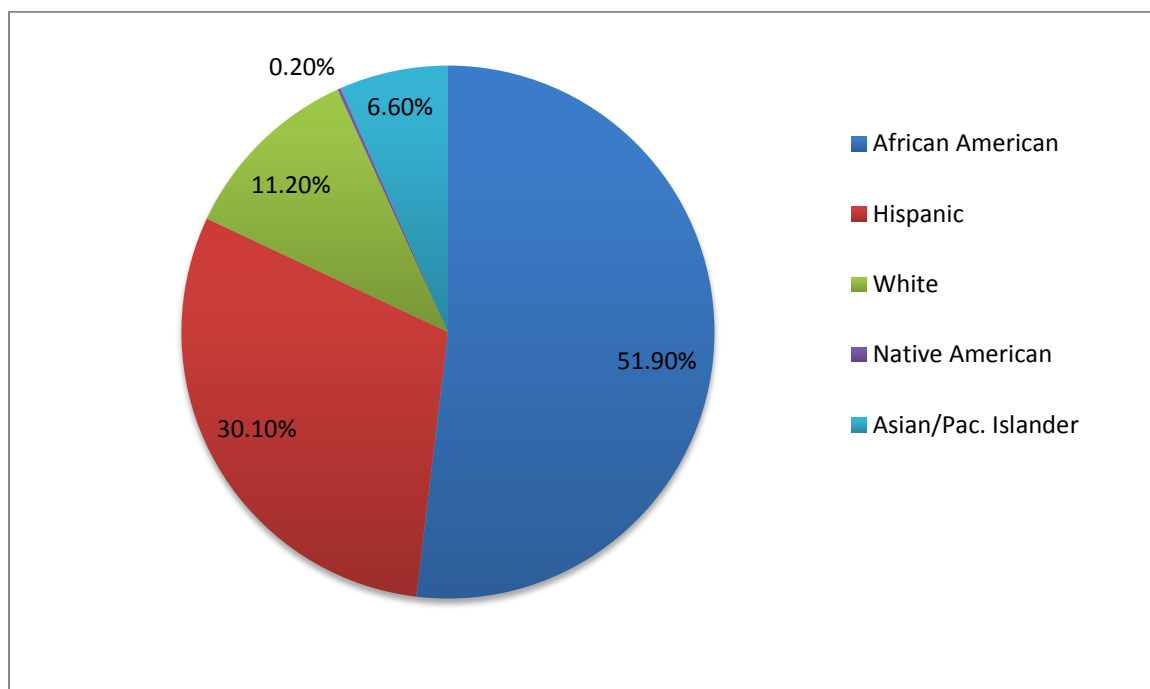
The population consisted of groups with similarities such as transitioning from middle school to high school and over 15% mobility. All of the subjects had the same characteristics in regards to ethnic distribution and instructional arrangements. Since ninth grade retention rates were increasingly high all over the United States, there were defining characteristics that were mentioned in this study by the researcher examining ninth grade students. All of these factors impacted graduation rates in large, comprehensive high schools (Smith, 2007).

Prior to 2004 Jackson High School held approximately 4,000 students. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast of the United States. This storm was the largest and third strongest storm to make land-fall in the history of the United States. The Category 5 (Staffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale) storm did extensive damage, but the aftermath was catastrophic for the coasts of Louisiana and Mississippi. The levees were designed for Category 3 storms, but a the storm reached Category 5 before it made land-

fall. The breaching of the levees resulted in massive flooding and detrimental destruction. The storm impacted over 15 million people and displaced thousands of families. Over 80% of New Orleans, Louisiana was underwater. Hurricane Katrina's final death toll was over 1,800. The economic impact was over \$150 billion to the state of Louisiana and Mississippi, making hurricane Katrina the most costliest hurricane in history. As a result, of the hurricane families lost all of their belongings as generations of culture and history washed away.

Displaced families evacuated all across the country as states tried to prepare to render help and support during this devastating time. Many families relocated to southeast Texas. Immediately following hurricane Katrina the population at Jackson High School increased by approximately 500 students. From 2004 to 2005 the population increased by over 10%. Two years after hurricane Katrina the population faced a steep decrease of over 22%. Many schools were not prepared for such an influx of students who were not only displaced, but traumatized from this severe tragedy (Clettenberg, Gentry, Held, & Mock, 2011). The extent that this influx in population had on the graduation rates at Jackson High School was unknown.

The ethnic distributions in 2005-2006, Cohort 1, were shown in Figure 3.1. As shown below, over 80% of the student population was either African American or Hispanic.



*Figure 3.1.* Student Demographic Data for Jackson High School 2005-2006

The sub-group data for students attending Jackson High School during the 2004-2005 school year was listed in Figure 3.2. The sub-groups were economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient (LEP), Students with disciplinary placements, and at-risk.

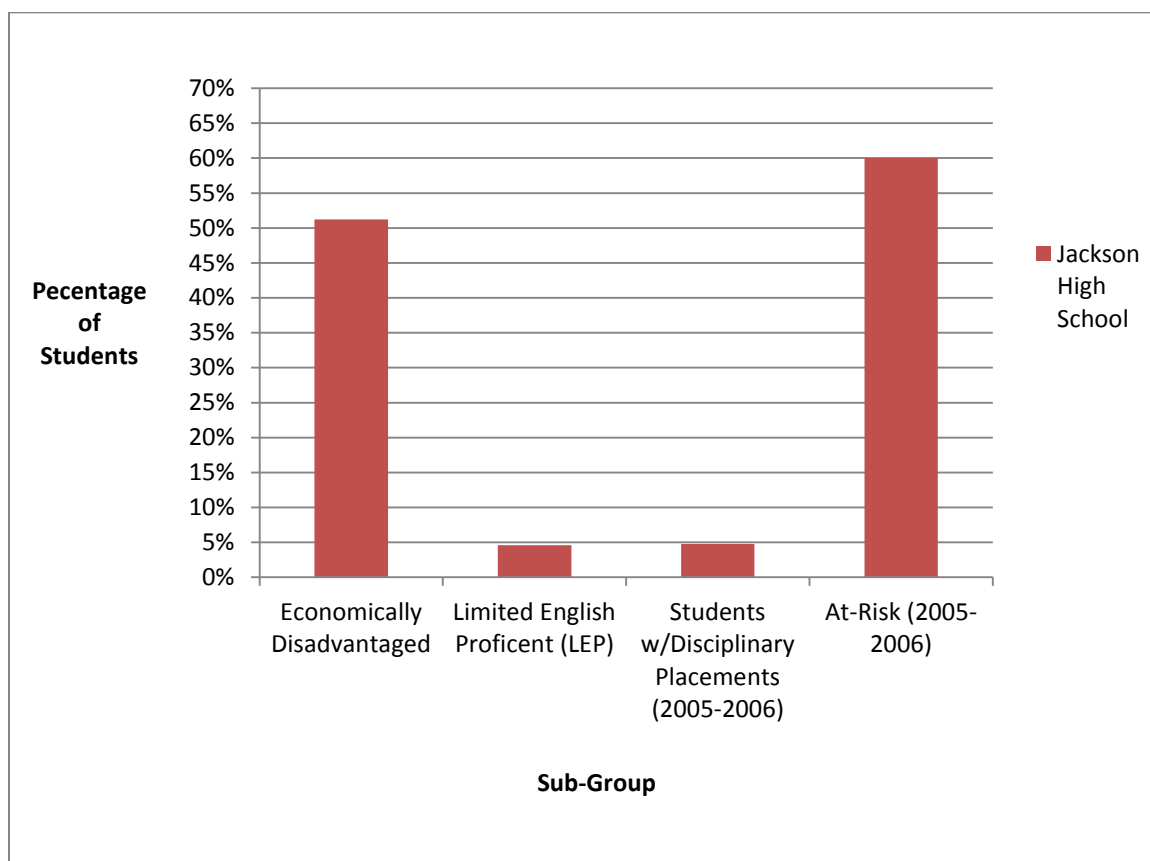
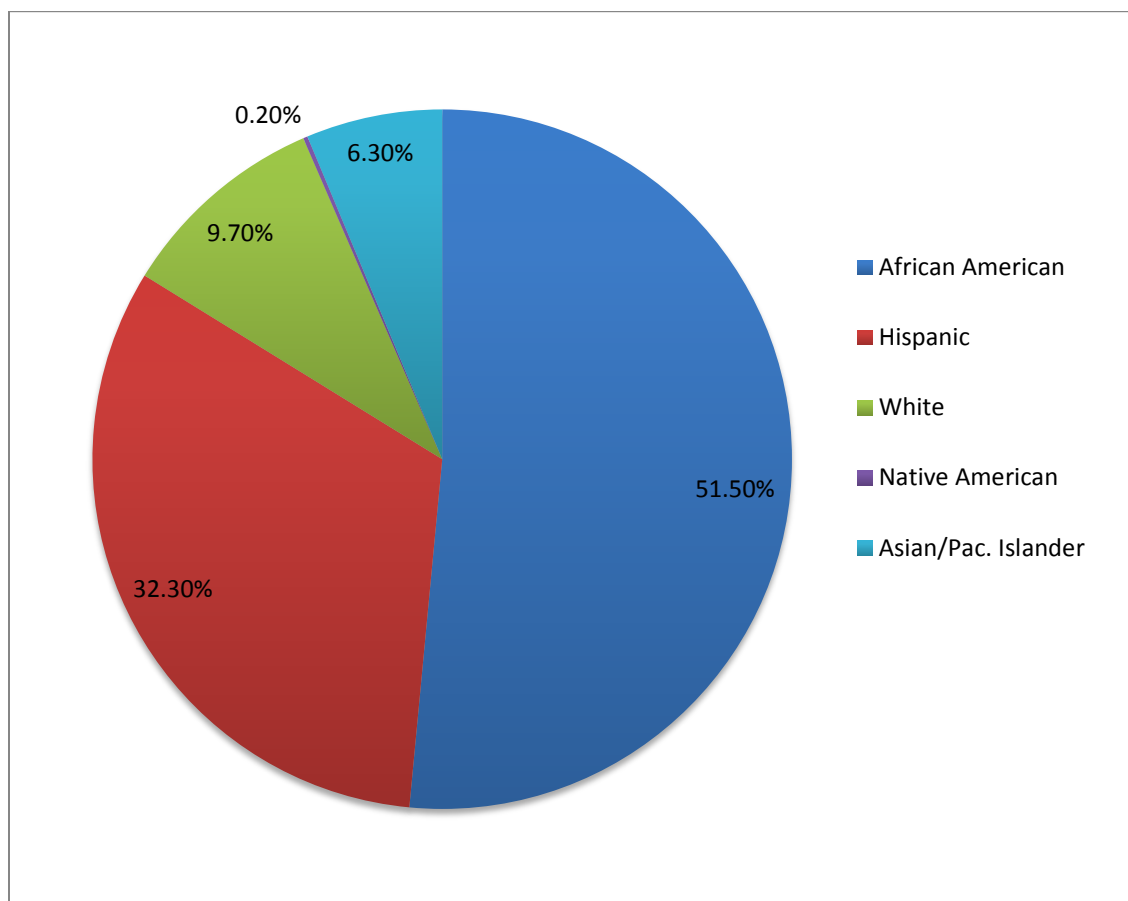


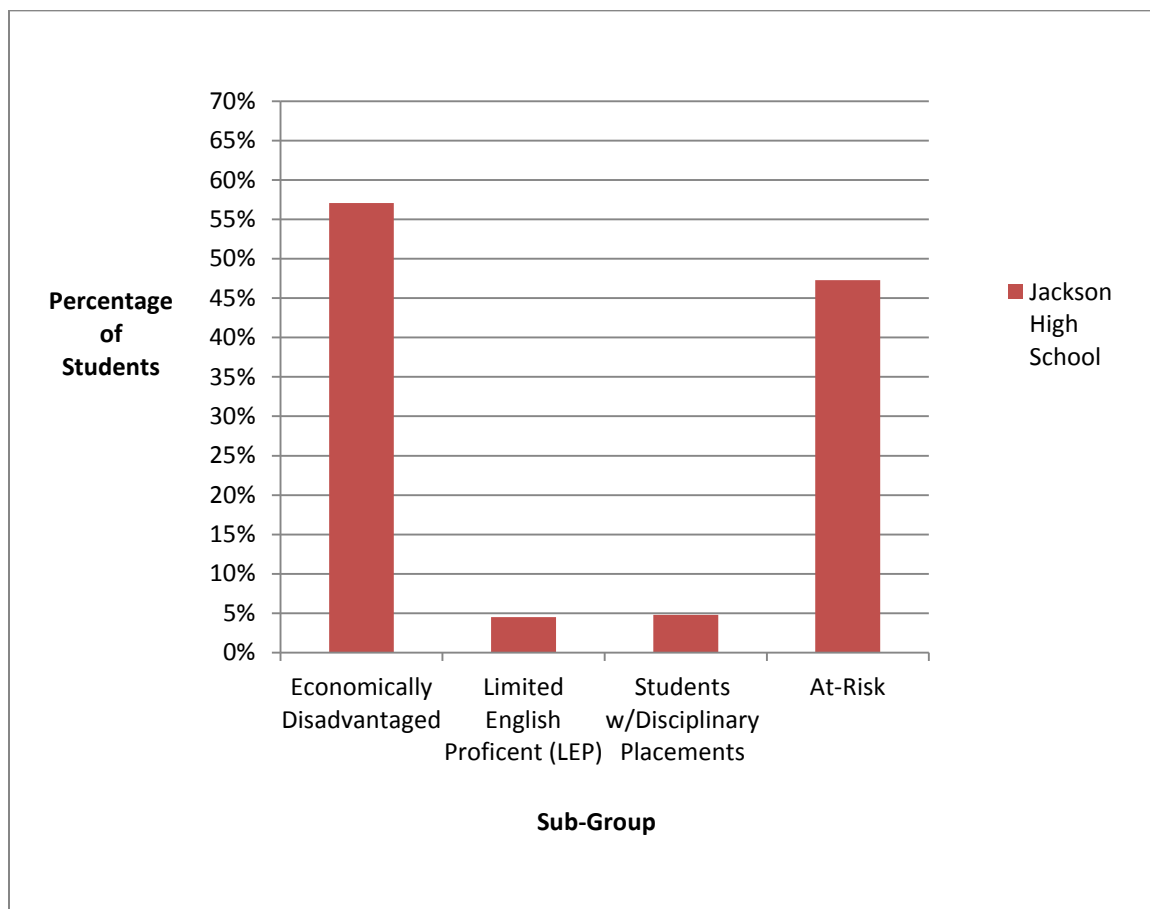
Figure 3.2. Student Sub-Group Data for 2005-2006

Student demographic data for students attending Jackson High School during the 2006-2007 school year (cohort 2) was delineated in Figure 3.3.



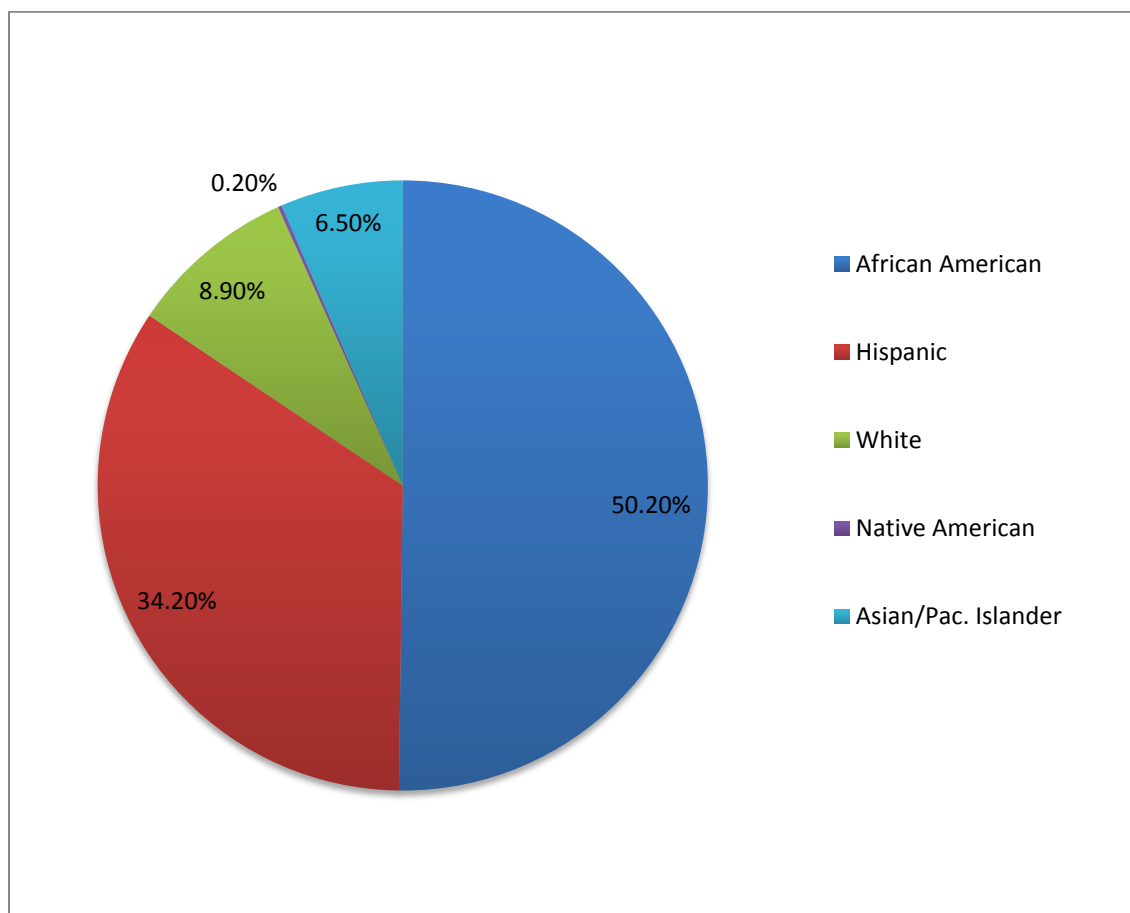
*Figure 3.3.* Student Demographic Data for Jackson High School 2006-2007

The following figure depicted the student sub-group information at Jackson High School for the 2006-2007 school year. Figure 3.4 included information regarding the percentage of the student population that were economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient (LEP), at-risk, and with disciplinary placements.



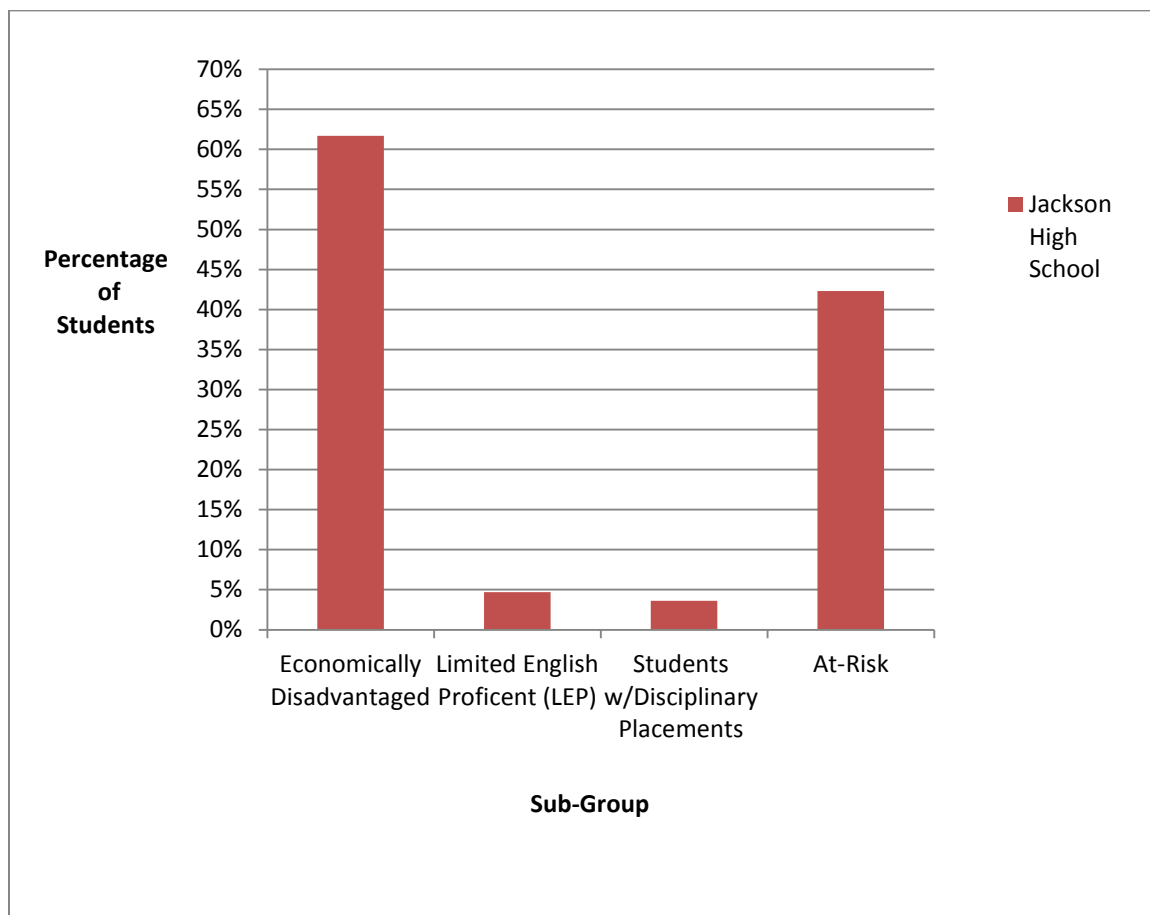
*Figure 3.4.* Student Sub-Group Data for 2006-2007

The demographic characteristics of Jackson High School for the 2007-2008 school year (cohort 3) was displayed below in Figure 3.5. As illustrated below, over 80% of the student population was minority.



*Figure 3.5.* Student Demographic Data for Jackson High School 2007-2008

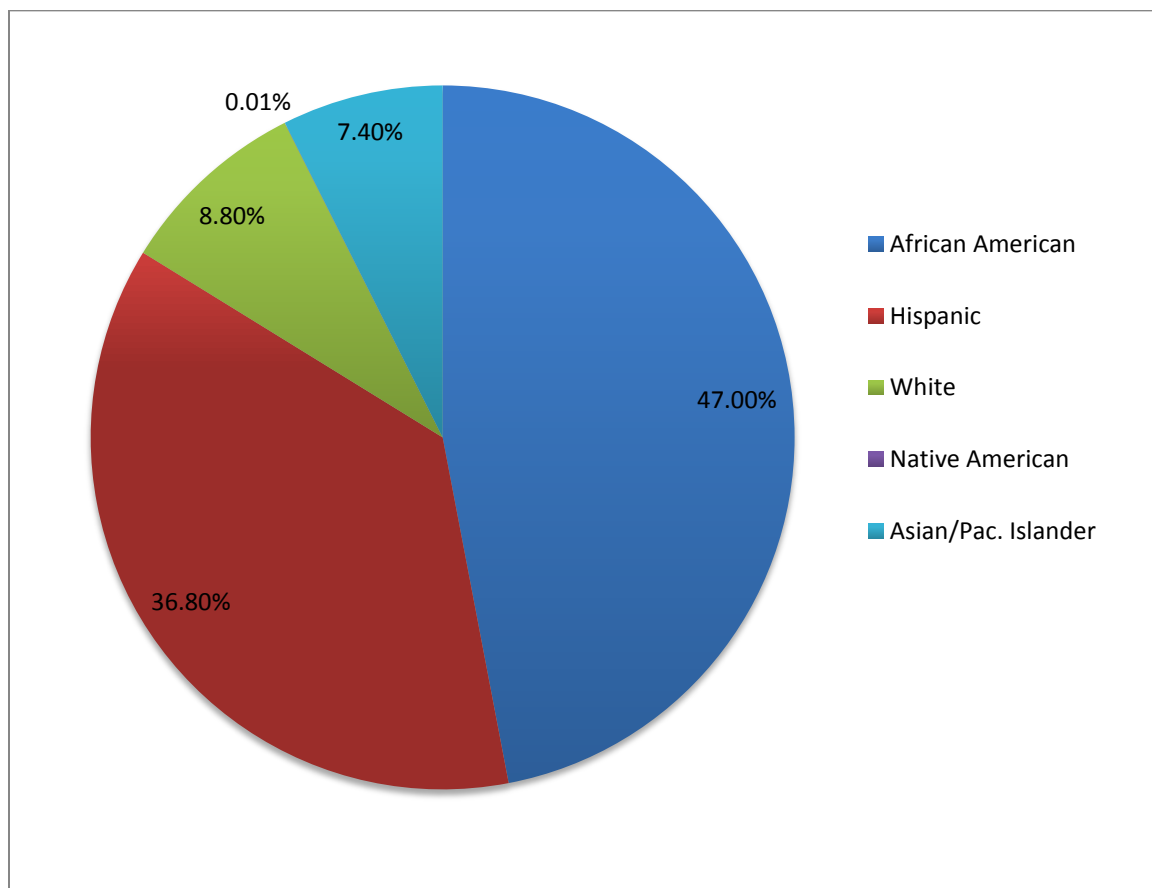
The percentage of the entire student population at Jackson High School during the 2007-2008 school year as it applied to sub-groups was featured in Figure 3.6. Student sub-groups displayed are at-risk, disciplinary placements, economically disadvantaged, and limited English proficient (LEP).



*Figure 3.6.* Student Sub-Group Data for 2007-2008



The demographic characteristics of Jackson High School for the 2008-2009 school year (cohort 4) was displayed below in Figure 3.7. The above Figures 3.1, 3.3, 3.5, and 3.7 displayed a consistent decrease in the African American population and a consistent increase in the Hispanic population over the course of four years.



*Figure 3.7.* Student Demographic Data for Jackson High School 2008-2009

Student sub-group information for Jackson High School cohort 4 was delineated in Figure 3.8. The percentage of limited English proficient students remained low for all four cohorts of students, but the percentage of economically disadvantaged students increased. The changes in student demographics as they related to socioeconomic status did not only affect Jackson High School, but all of Kelley Independent School District.

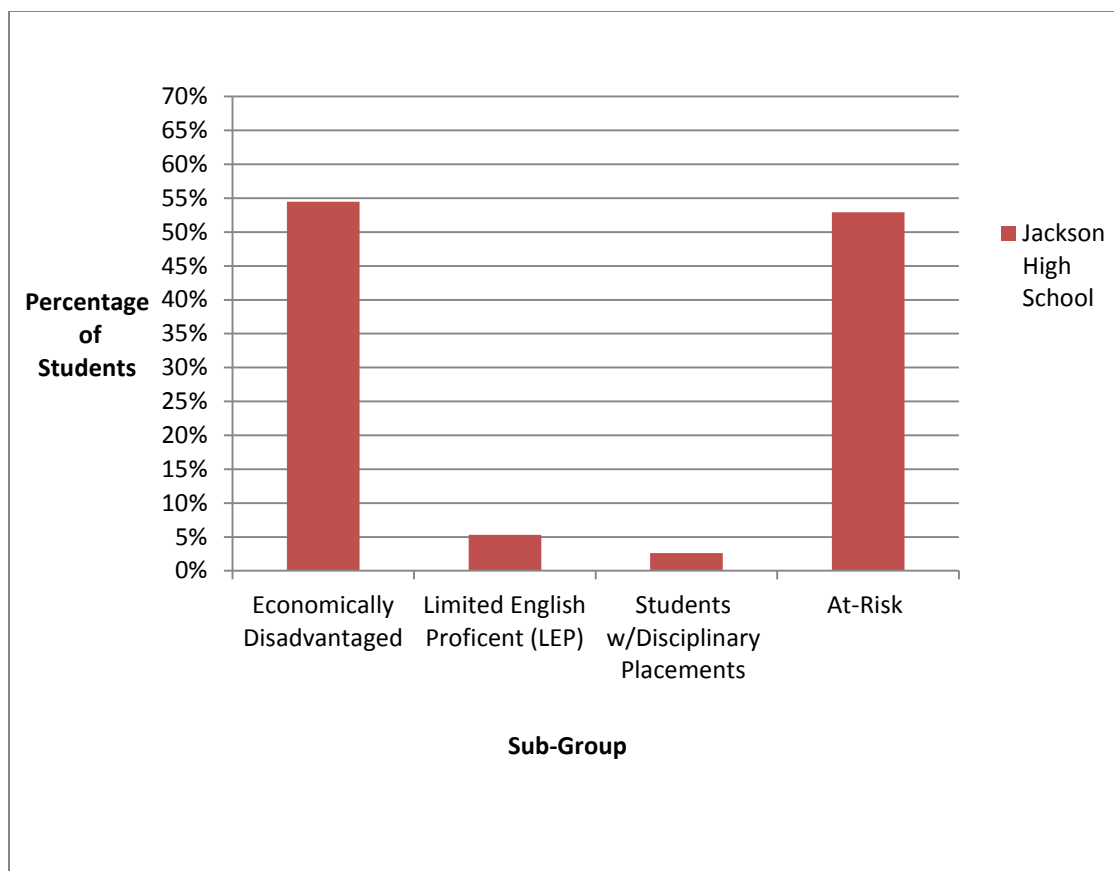
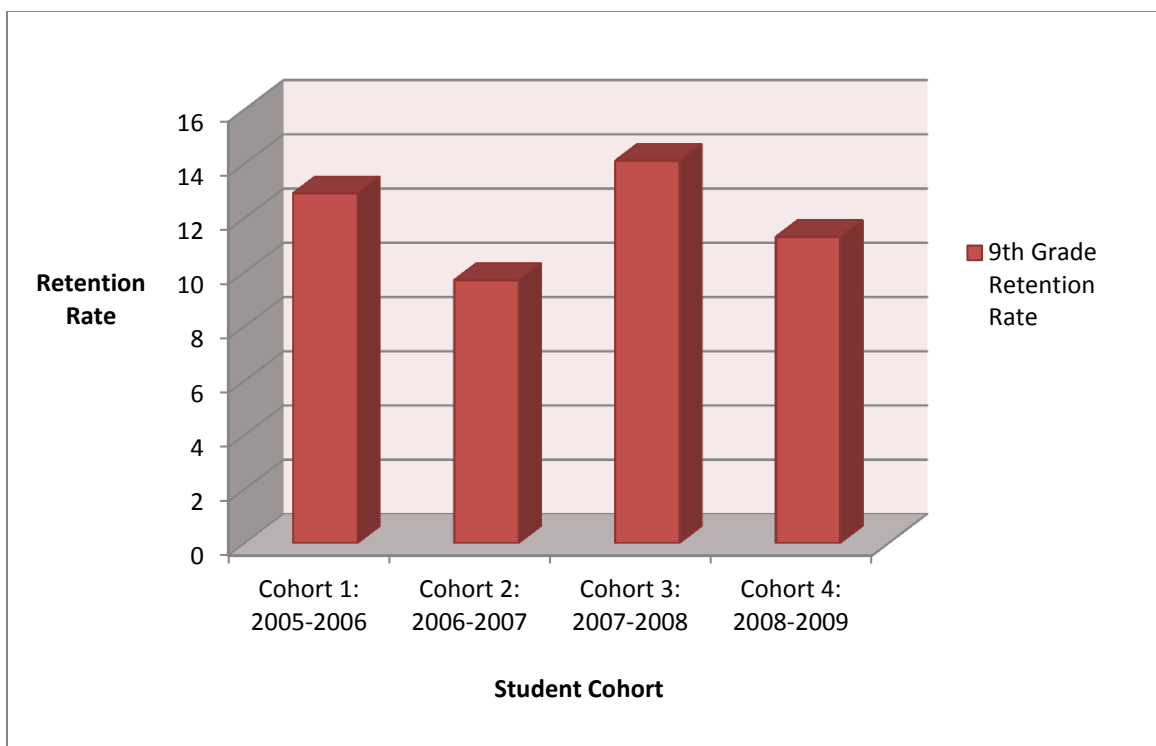


Figure 3.8. Student Sub-Group Data for 2008-2009



*Figure 3.9. Student 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Retention Rates for Cohorts 1-4*

As revealed in Figure 3.9, the ninth grade retention rates at Jackson Ninth Grade Campus and Jackson High School were inconsistent between the school years of 2005-2006, 2006-2007, 2007-2008, and 2008-2009. The effects of the mobile clientele brought students less prepared for graduation to Jackson High School.

There were two samples of participants included in this study; one served as the control group and the other served as the treatment, or experimental group. The first population served as the control group and consisted of first-time freshman students who were housed on a high school campus with students in grade levels nine through twelve during the academic school years 2005-2006 and 2006-2007. This group of students was referred to as “in-house freshmen.” They were grouped according to cohorts of ninth grade students and compared to ninth grade students that were housed in a separate ninth grade campus or center for academic school years 2007-2008 and 2008-2009. The second

group of students, which was referred to as the treatment group, included first-time freshmen who were housed in a separate facility away from grade levels 10 through 12 their freshman year. These students attended classes at a separate physical location and were referred to as “ninth grade center students.” A comparison of data from each population of was conducted to determine whether there was difference in the graduation rates of in house freshmen, compared to freshmen who attended the ninth grade center. This method allowed for entire cohorts of students to be tracked. Convenience sampling was used when determining the method of gathering this sample because the data needed for the students was readily assessable in archived reports kept by district personnel. The availability of data and the participant criteria determined the number of students who were included in each of the four cohorts.

### **Data Collection**

A longitudinal ex post facto casual comparative quantitative research design was utilized with the intent to analyze longitudinal archival data. When “investigators attempt to determine the cause or consequences of differences that already exist between or among groups of individuals” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 363), one’s research became causal comparative. The two groups in this study differed by the campus structure they attended for the ninth grade. Because the difference in campus structure had already occurred and the researcher was examining the effect it has on graduation rates, this casual comparative research was capable of being referred to as ex post facto (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The orientation for this variation started with the cause and investigated its effects on some variable; more specifically, the campus structure and its effect on high school graduation rates. The purpose of ex post facto casual comparative research was to

attempt to explore the effect caused by separating first-time freshman students, or what differences in graduation rates were caused by separating first-time freshman students from tenth through twelfth grade students.

A human subject application was submitted to the University of Houston's Research Division through the Research Administration Management Portal (RAMP) online. Along with the human subject application, an Application to Conduct Research to the Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction for the school district involved in this study was also submitted. The request including a copy of the abstract which indicated the purpose, the rationale, the sample design and procedures, the data collection procedures, the analysis procedures, the use of results; and a copy of the instrumentation was submitted for approval. However, the request had to be amended while conducting the study because the years initially stated in the application became irrelevant for the purposes of this study. A meeting with the Executive Director for Research and Data Analysis was scheduled to explain the components of this study. A thorough description of the study and its implications on the district were discussed with the Executive Director of Research and Data Analysis. A data analysis tutorial was conducted to determine the most conducive, yet time efficient, method to statistically analyze the data. Once permission was granted it was necessary to request the information from the Executive Director of Student Services who informed the researcher of the limitations of assessable data. Limits of assessable data prompted a limitation to the last four graduating classes in the district. The PEIMS Plus software purchased by the school district was not immediately available to gather this information, so data was not attainable until the software representative rectified the issue. With the assistance of a

data programmer and analyst from the central office, the appropriate data relevant to the four groups of ninth grade students from 2005-2006, 2006-2007, 2007-2008, and 2008-2009 school years, and the actual students who graduated in Classes of 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 was collected. Considering the sensitive nature of the information, the highest level of confidentiality was held at all times. No student's name, identification number, demographics, disciplinary assignments, or gradation status was seen by anyone other than the researcher, the Executive Director of Student Services, and the Data Programmer and Analysis at any time or any place. Student records were only used to extract relevant information for this study.

In the research design, which was a longitudinal ex post facto casual comparative quantitative study, there was a control or comparison group, but the treatment was not manipulated because it had already occurred (Smith, 2007). As ex post facto research design explores possible causes and effects, the independent variable was not manipulated because it was applied. In this study the independent variable (which was the campus structure), was not altered as the dependent variable (graduation rate) was focused on determining what arrangement resulted in a higher graduation rate. In this study, there were four groups of participants under comparison--- two that received treatment and two who did not receive treatment---- during their ninth grade years of high school. Factors that impact graduation rates and graduating with the correct cohort are: students' grade point averages (based on course grades), the number of credits earned, attendance, student retention, and the passing of the Exit Level Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

According to Maureen Giuffre (1997), one of the major weaknesses of a study that uses ex post facto design was its internal validity. Of the five most frequent threats to internal validity, history and selection were the most commonly seen threats to internal validity in this type of design (Giuffre, 1997).

### **Instrumentation**

Data collected relevant this study included the following:

1. All students enrolled at Jackson Ninth Grade Campus as freshmen during 2005-2006
2. All students enrolled at Jackson Ninth Grade Campus as freshmen during 2006-2007
3. Students enrolled at Jackson High School as freshmen during 2007-2008
4. Students enrolled at Jackson High School as freshmen during 2008-2009
5. All students enrolled at Jackson Ninth Grade Campus as freshmen during 2005-2006, and then graduated in the Class of 2009
6. All students enrolled at Jackson Ninth Grade Campus as freshmen during 2006-2007, and then graduated in the Class of 2010
7. Students enrolled at Jackson High School as freshmen during 2007-2008, and then graduated in the Class of 2011
8. Students enrolled at Jackson High School as freshmen during 2008-2009, and then graduated in the Class of 2012
9. Student demographic data included: ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status for Jackson High School and graduating classes

#### *10. Student sub-group data and instructional arrangement data for Jackson High*

##### *School and graduating classes*

The graduation rates were the dependent variables included in this study. The ninth grade campus and the traditional nine through twelve high schools were the two independent variables.

##### **Texas Education Agency**

Two of the most imperative responsibilities of the Texas Education Agency were to assess public school students regarding what they have learned and determine district and school accountability ratings (TEA, 2011). TEA provided an array of results based reports on student assessment. The Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) pulled together a wide-range of information based on the performance of every school district in the State of Texas. The Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) encompassed all data requested and received by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in regards to public education. This included information on student demographics, student academic performance, campus personnel, financial and organizational information. Section 1111(h)(2) of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) required each local education agency that received Title I, Part A funding to disseminate specific education agency and campus level data to all campuses, parents of enrolled students, and to make the information widely available through public means such as posting on the internet, distribution to the media, or distribution through public agencies. In compliance with this requirement the TEA provided these statistics at the state level and for each district or campus.



PEIMS Data Plus was a management information system used by school district to publish data. This software was a full data warehouse that includes historical data, state assessment data, individual profiles for all students including assessment and program information. This software allowed data to be extracted directly from the Academic Excellence Indicator System report and published in graphical format on a school district's website.

### **Limitations**

This study examined one high school that experimented with the ninth grade campus model for four years. The students in cohorts one and two attended the ninth grade campus their freshman year and joined the main campus for grades ten through twelve. The students in cohorts three and four attended the traditional nine through twelve high school from their freshman through senior year. Data utilized originated from four years of archival student data. Data was only available for those students who graduated from the campus in which they were enrolled as freshmen. Students who moved to another campus after starting their freshman year were not included in the original cohort's graduation rate. PEIMS data and AEIS reports only indicated limited amounts of information for students who were highly mobile. There was no parent, school staff, administration, community, or student input solicited.

The state maintained data on the number of students who withdraw from a campus. If they withdrew from one campus and enrolled in another Texas school, they were tracked; however, if they did not enroll in another Texas school it was possible for them to be considered as a student who has dropped out of school. As a result, it was impossible to know how much of an affect this may have had on the internal validity of

this study. Therefore, the information in this study is based on the population of students for whom data was available. According to the Texas Education Agency's "Grade-Level Retention in Texas Public Schools, 2009-10" "retention rates were calculated by dividing number of students retained by total student count. Because of the criteria used, student counts in this report differed from those in other agency publications (TEA, 2011)." This discovery had significant research conclusions regarding students actually graduating with their cohort, thus impacting graduation rates of pure cohorts.

### **Conclusion**

The methodology of this research study was designed to answer the following research question:

1. Do differences exist in graduation rates between students who attended ninth grade campuses as opposed to students who attended traditional campuses?

The use of descriptive analyses provided evidence of the differences that separating first-time freshman students had on graduation rates.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

Chapter 4 included all of the descriptive analyses regarding this study and discussed the results. This study was specifically designed to determine whether differences existed between separating first-time freshmen students from tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders, and graduation rates. Research indicated that it was inconclusive to determine whether students were more likely to drop out of high school in the ninth grade rather than later grades. However, the results of this study did determine that there were trends in demographics worthy of mention. The results of this study helped school districts strategically plan for the future. The purpose of this chapter was to present quantitative results.

#### **Research Question**

Addressed in this study was the following research question:

1. Do differences exist in graduation rates between students who attended ninth grade campuses as opposed to students who attended traditional campuses?

#### **Research Hypothesis**

1. Students attending a ninth grade campus had higher graduation rates than students who attended traditional ninth through twelfth grade campus.

#### **Results for Research Question One**

To address the research question regarding the differences between attending or not attending a ninth grade campus and high school graduation rates descriptive analyses were performed. The research hypothesis stated that students who were enrolled at the ninth grade campus during their freshman year of high school would have higher

graduation rates than students who attended the traditional ninth through twelfth grade campus.

A limitation of this study was that students could have enrolled in another campus or dropped out of school. Their re-enrollment was not represented in this data, thus this represented the reported graduation rates.

As indicated in Table 4.1, graduation rates drastically decreased by 22.87% from 2009 to 2010. The student graduation rates of cohorts increased by 13.49% from 2010 to 2011 and by 10.90% from 2011 to 2012. The total graduation rates reflected the graduation rates for *all* students who graduated from Jackson High School in classes of 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012. The cohort graduation rate measured *only* the graduation rates for the students who began at either Jackson Ninth Grade Campus (class of 2009 and class of 2010) or Jackson High School (class of 2011 and class of 2012) and graduated from Jackson High School within their correct cohort four years later.

Table 4.1

*Graduation Rates for Class Group by Population*

Class	Cohort	N	Graduation Rate
			Cohort %
Class of 2009 (9 <sup>th</sup> Grade Campus)	1	757	68.26
Class of 2010 (9 <sup>th</sup> Grade Campus)	2	546	45.39
Class of 2011	3	507	58.88
Class of 2012	4	498	69.78

Delineated in Table 4.2 was the number of students in who began as freshmen in cohort 1 during the 2005-2006 school year, and the number and percentage of students who graduated in class of 2009. As can be seen in Table 4.2, 44.55% of cohort 1 students (the actual population sample) who attended Jackson Ninth Grade Campus went on to graduate from Jackson High School in class of 2009.

Table 4.2

*Percentage of Students Who Began in Cohort 1:2005-2006 and Graduated in Class of 2009*

Cohort	Population		%
	<i>N</i>	Graduated	
1 (9 <sup>th</sup> Grade Campus)	1699	757	44.55

The percentage of students who began in cohort 2 during the 2006-2007 school year, and graduated in class of 2010 was depicted in Table 4.3. The table revealed that of the 1779 students who began at Jackson Ninth Grade Campus only 30.69% of those students graduated in the same feeder pattern at Jackson High School in the class of 2010. The percentages below did not indicate that a student did not graduate at all. A limitation of this study was that students could have enrolled in another campus or dropped out of school. Their re-enrollment was not represented in this data, thus this represented the percentage of individual students tracked from cohort 2 to the class of 2009.

Table 4.3

*Percentage of Students Who Began in Cohort 2:2006-2007 and Graduated in Class of 2010*

Cohort	Population		%
	<i>N</i>	Graduated	
2 (9 <sup>th</sup> Grade Campus)	1799	546	30.69

Presented in Table 4.4 was the percentage of students who graduated in the class of 2011 who were freshmen at Jackson High School during the 2007-2008 (cohort 3) school year. The results indicated that a larger percentage of students graduated from cohort 3 than cohort 2.

Table 4.4

*Percentage of Students Who Began in Cohort 3:2007-2008 and Graduated in Class of 2011*

Cohort	Population		%
	<i>n</i>	Graduated	
3	1034	507	49.03

Table 4.5 depicted the data for students in cohort four. The percentage of cohort 4 that began at Jackson High School and continued to graduate from Jackson High School in the class of 2012 was revealed in Table 4.5. Shown below is the percentage of students declined from cohort 3 to cohort 4.

Table 4.5

*Percentage of Students Who Began in Cohort 4:2008-2009 and Graduated in Class of 2012*

Cohort	Population		%
	<i>n</i>	Graduated	
4	1231	498	40.45



The longitudinal graduation rates of the special populations in cohorts 1, 2, and 3 were delineated in Figure 4.1. longitudinal data regarding class of 2012 were not yet available for usage due to the close proximity of dates. The special population groups were comprised of at-risk, bilingual/English as a second language, limited English proficient, gifted and talented, economically disadvantaged, and special education. As revealed in Figure 4.1, there was a significantly lower graduation rate for bilingual or English as a second language and limited English proficient students. The significant decline in the graduation rates of English as a second language and limited English proficient students indicated that a higher percentage of students that attended a ninth grade campus as freshmen in these special populations graduated.

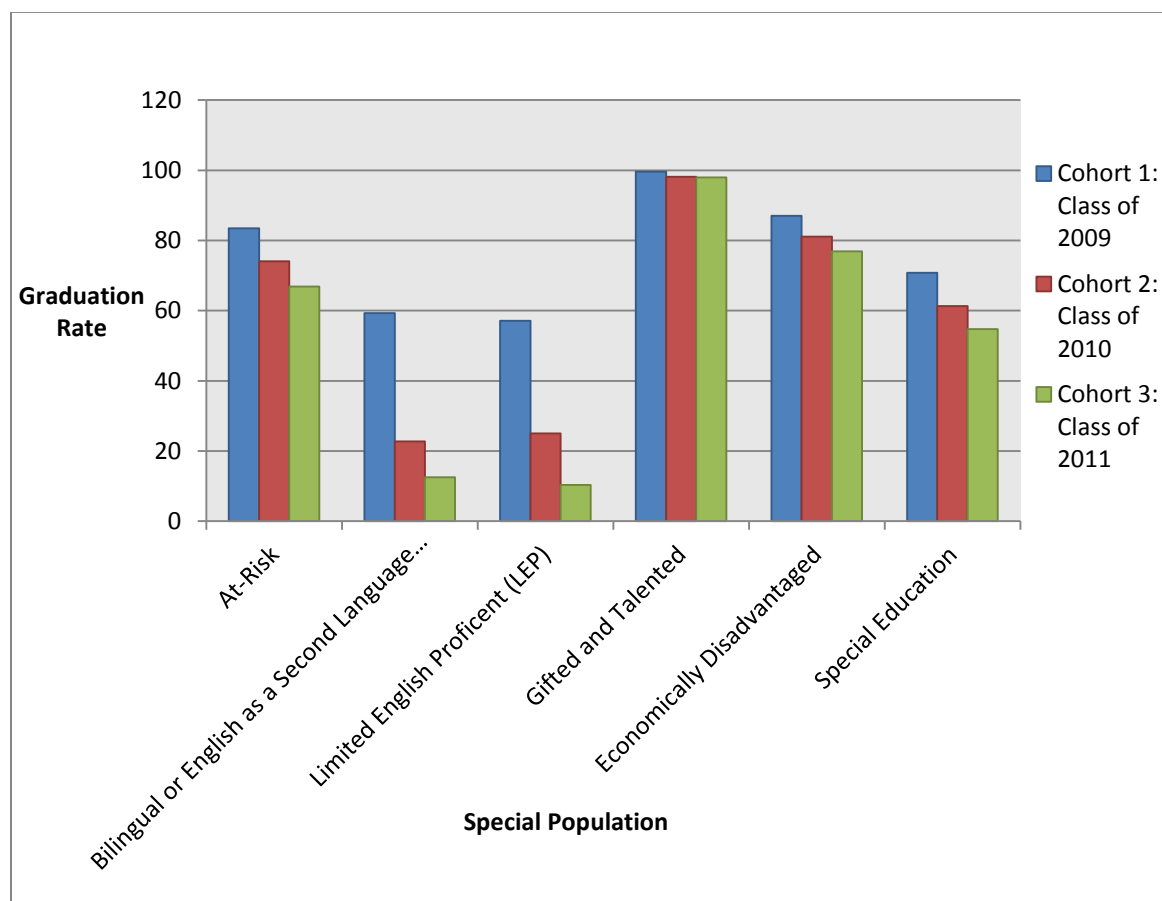
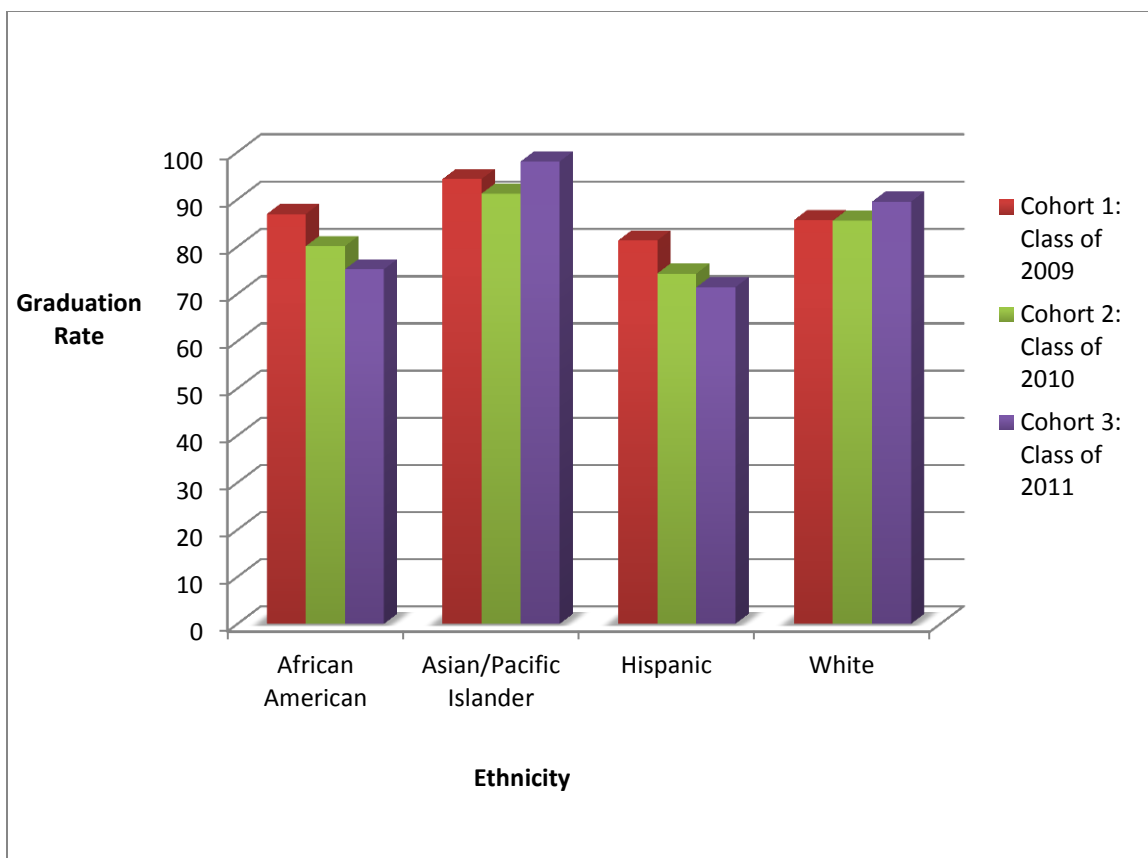


Figure 4.1. Student Longitudinal Graduation Rates by Special Population for Cohorts 1-3

The longitudinal graduation rates by ethnicity for cohorts 1, 2, and 3 were revealed in Figure 4.2. The graduation rates for cohort 4 were not readily available for analysis by ethnic distribution. The graphic representation provided a portrayal of graduation rates for African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Whites in cohorts one to three. Longitudinal graduation rates by ethnicity were not yet available for cohort 4 which was class of 2012. The graduation rates below revealed that the graduation rates of African American and Hispanic students continued to decrease after Jackson Ninth Grade Campus was closed and students returned to Jackson High School as freshmen. It is unknown if the graduation rates for African American and Hispanic students were higher in cohorts 1 and 2 as a result of attending Jackson Ninth Grade Campus.



*Figure 4.2.* Student Longitudinal Graduation Rates by Ethnic Distribution for Cohorts 1-3

The longitudinal graduation rates of the classes of 2009, 2010, and 2011 according to gender were depicted in Figure 4.3. Information for class of 2012 (cohort 4) was not yet available from the Texas Education Agency. The graduation rates for male students were lower than their female counterparts in all four classes of students. These graduation rates show that the male graduation rates were higher for students who attended Jackson Ninth Grade Campus as freshmen. The data in Figure 4.3 revealed a steady decline between the graduation rates of males and female. It should be noted that the graduation rates of male students was at least 7% lower than the graduation rates of females in all three cohorts. Graduation rates by gender for class of 2012 were not available.

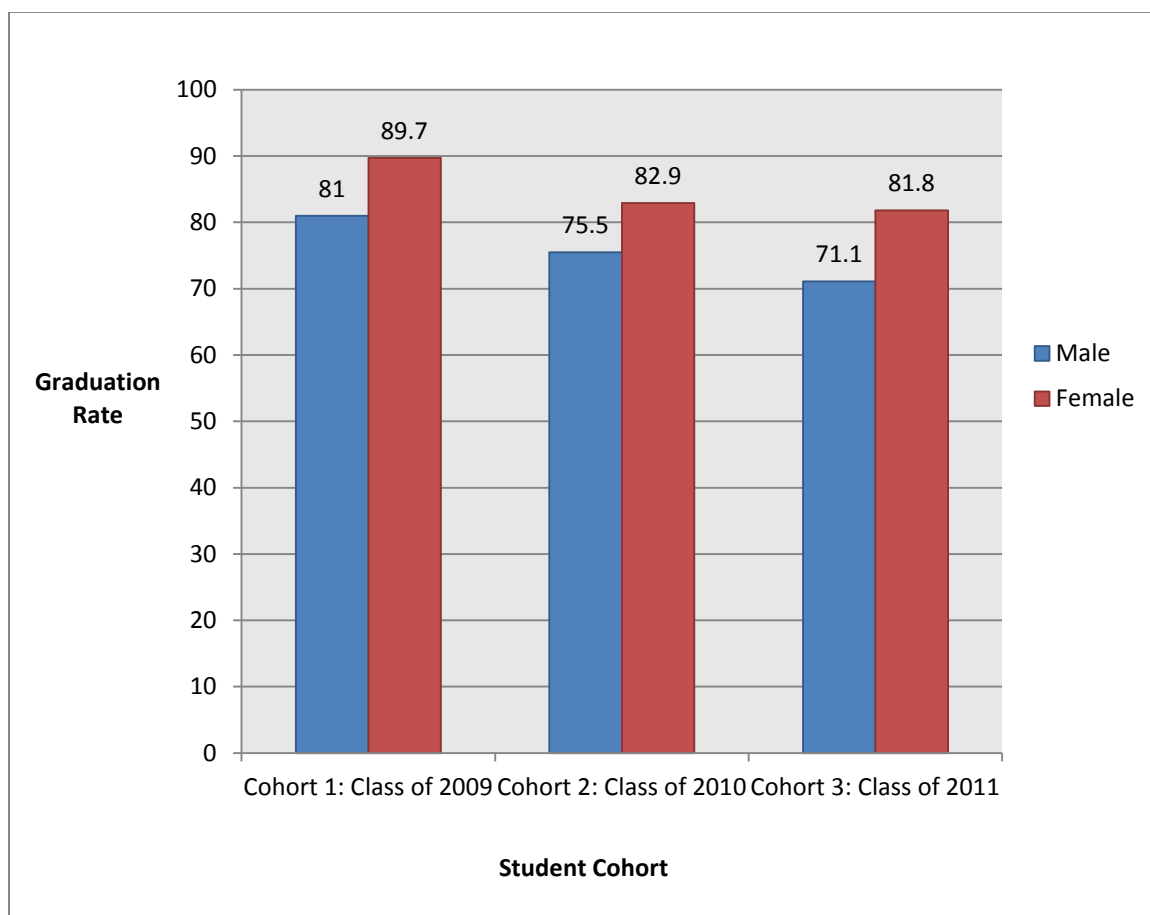


Figure 4.3. Student Longitudinal Graduation Rates by Gender for Cohorts 1-3

## **Summary of Results**

The purpose of this study was to determine if ninth grade campuses increased high school graduation rates. The study attempted to determine if differences existed between separating ninth grade students from tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students and graduation rates. This longitudinal ex post facto casual-comparative quantitative study attempted to answer the research question which focused on identifying whether any differences existed when separating 9<sup>th</sup> grade students from students in other grade levels and graduation rates.

These results did not confirm that a difference existed between the total graduation rates of students who attended a ninth grade center and students who did not attend a ninth grade center. Whether ninth grade centers increased high school graduation rates was indeterminate. This study of campus types added to the body of research regarding graduation rates. Through the analysis of four cohorts of students and four graduating classes of students, it was inconclusive that campus type had an impact on the graduation rates of students. Although it was undetermined if ninth grade centers increased graduation rates, the results did revealed that graduation rates were higher for certain sub-groups and special populations. The graduation rates of English as a second language and bilingual/ limited English proficient students consistently declined with each class of students. The effect ninth grade centers had on those graduation rates was unknown. Also noted were the decreased graduation rates of male students. This chapter presented the data analyses findings. The data analysis did not support that students who attended the ninth grade center had higher graduation rates than students who attended

the traditional campus. Chapter five provided an interpretation of these findings and discussed the implications of the findings.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions**

Chapter 5 discussed the results of this study as they related to the research question, implications for school leaders, and recommendations for further research. The purpose of this study was to determine whether having a ninth grade campus separating first time ninth-grade students from tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students actually increased student graduation rates. The future implications for leadership were derived from the findings of this study and the review of literature. Each of these pertained to research proven best practices, as well as methods to monitor student achievement which were included in this study.

### **Overview of Study**

The current literature and studies on the topic of ninth-grade students indicated that it was imperative for these first-time ninth-grade students to receive as much support and assistance as possible. This study examined the impact ninth grade campuses, as compared traditional high schools, had on the graduation rates of students. This study was designed to add to the existing body of research relative to increasing graduation rates and the ninth grade transition. A comparison of graduation rates for four cohorts of students was examined to determine whether a difference existed in the graduation rates of first-time freshman students who attended a stand-alone ninth grade campus, and those who attended a traditional nine through twelve high school. All freshman students attended the same high school in southeast Texas; however, the school board of Kelley Independent School District decided to house first-time freshman students in a separate stand-alone ninth grade campus on a trial basis. The first two cohorts of students attended

the ninth grade campus, but cohorts three and four did not attend the ninth grade campus their freshman year.

## **Discussion of Results**

### **Research Question One**

Do differences exist in graduation rates between students who attended ninth-grade campuses as opposed to students who attended traditional campuses?

In this longitudinal ex post facto causal comparative quantitative investigation, descriptive analyses were examined between students who attended ninth grade campuses and students who attended traditional campuses. The students who attended the ninth grade campus did not have a higher percentage of total graduation rates than the students who attended the traditional campus. However, it should be noted that the total graduation rates of male and English as a second language/bilingual students were higher for classes of students who attended the ninth grade campus.

### **Implications for School Leaders**

Even though the findings of this study did not find significant differences between the graduation rates of students who attended the ninth grade campus and students who attended the traditional campus, the daunting task of determining the best methods to ensure student success and high school graduation still falls on school leaders. It is imperative that school leaders stay abreast of current trends in education, as well as remaining knowledgeable of what research says regarding their student populations. Educators will be able to utilize the data from this study by deciding how to employ this information for students within their district. There were multiple educational best practices discussed in chapter two which include the following:



1. developing transition programs;
2. reviewing student retention trends and credit recovery;
3. developing research based interventions;
4. reviewing placement decision making processes;
5. increasing graduation rates for limited English proficient students; and
6. increasing the graduation rates of male students.

These intervention models should be utilized by school leaders regardless of campus design. Specifically, transition programs, student retention initiatives, and strategies to address the needs of specific sub-populations are important for administrators to implement.

### **Transition Programs**

According to Chen and Gregory (2009), students whose parents had higher expectations about grades and attaining good grades not only had higher grade point averages, but were also more engaged in their learning. Transition programs should be designed to assist incoming freshman student adapt to their new learning environment and be successful. Effective programs provided information about the campus, social support, and collaboration between the middle schools that fed into the high school (Mac Iver, 1990). In addition to the physical changes that students experienced during adolescence, transitioning students also undergo drastic emotional changes. As students endured somewhat of an emotional roller coaster, they developed a false sense of security from their “erratic and inconsistent behavior” (Letrello & Miles, 2003, p.1). Research identified inadequate preparation for high school as one of the top challenges for transitioning students. Coined as the “make or break” year in high school, the ninth grade

has become an indicator for student performance throughout high school. Student success in the ninth grade is essential for the completion of high school. According to Neild (2009) “students who fail to earn as many credits as they should during ninth grade—face a substantially elevated risk of dropping out of high school” (p. 3). Transition programs helped students adjust to high school life and helped reduce the stress of transitioning (McIntosh & White, 2006). Enlisting the assistance of parents and developing partnerships between the school and parents provided additional support for students while promoting adaptive behavior (Chen & Gregory, 2010). Arguably, failing mathematics or English language arts courses in middle school was a stronger indicator of the academic success a student would have in high school; therefore, it was imperative that transitioning students were surrounded by “caring adults who can help them navigate the treacherous waters of growing up” (Neild, 2009, p. 63). When evaluating transition programs, indicators of effective transition programs were:

1. decreased disciplinary infractions;
2. less student retention;
3. decreased truancy and absences;
4. active participation in extracurricular activities;
5. involved parents; and
6. positive and goal-oriented students (Brown, Dedmond, & LaFauci, 2006).

Perhaps support and student engagement were the most essential components in making the ninth grade transition successful. Current research indicated that transitioning students with parents and staff members who were actively engaged in their academic progress were less likely to drop out of school regardless of socioeconomic status and

instructional arrangement (Smith, 1997; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999). Effective practices in transition programs began by simply adding a *Freshman101* course to the curriculum through comprehensive transitional programs. Brown, Dedmond, & LaFauci (2006) went so far to suggest that “although the concept of freshman transition has been around for quite some time, programs that incorporated the minimum of a year-long course and an application of skills to students’ future careers were scarce but needed for a successful program” (p.3). By adding a transition course to the curriculum for freshman students, school leaders have the ability to custom write a curriculum that addresses the specific needs of their student population. Through examining transitioning initiatives and ninth grade academies, Smith (2007) suggested that comprehensive programs included:

1. personalized small learning communities;
2. teacher teams with lead teachers for collaboration;
3. locked scheduling in English language arts and mathematics;
4. freshman seminar or freshman transition course;
5. a clear and concise focus on student achievement and progress; and
6. support from campus and district leadership. (pp.2-3)

Ginther and Yingling (2011) established eight steps school leaders could utilize to implement a comprehensive ninth grade transition program:

1. define targets and who the beneficiaries of the program would be;
2. examine and evaluating conditions prior to implementation;
3. develop an plan of action;
4. create a curriculum that meets the unique needs of the campus;
5. identify student leaders and faculty mentors to articulate the vision;

6. implement the plan and include a control central location to keep the program running;
7. train student mentors and provide professional learning opportunities for staff; and
8. evaluate the program and make the appropriate changes.

### **Student Retention**

Student retention can prevent a student from graduating on time with their cohort. The requirements for promotion to the next grade level are set by school districts, while graduation requirements were established by the state (Neild, 2009). Many educators are using online learning as an opportunity to meet the diverse needs of learners. Schools are encouraged to utilize computer based programs to assist students (Christie, 2008). These online programs were designed to address those at-risk students who have failed or lose credit in one or more courses. Online learning offers the option for personalization, individualized support and attention to students as they need assistance (Gemin & Watson, 2006). Educators who made the decision to socially promote students or allow credit recovery to students who did not pass a course may actually be doing more of a disservice to students than they realize. District and campus accountability is an inevitable component of public education in the state of Texas. Previously students just had to pass and receive credit for the courses required for graduation and pass the Exit Level Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills exam in the eleventh grade in order to graduate. Recently a new state assessment has been implemented that holds more weight towards graduation than the previous test. The State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness replaced the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skill in the spring of 2012.

In high school, twelve End-of-Course exams replaced grade specific assessments. These exams will be taken when students are enrolled in the corresponding courses. All twelve exams are required for graduation. This assessment is one the most rigorous assessments to date in Texas. The State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) End-of-Course score will count for approximately 15% of a student's final grade in the corresponding course. This measurement has the potential to drastically affect graduation rates. Online learning opportunities can assist students with course work and earning the required credits for graduation; however, the passing of all twelve End-of-Course exams is required for graduation and is calculated into the final grade. When a student is not successful on an End-of-Course exam he or she must continue to take the exam until he or she meets the standard. Therefore, a student can potentially fail a course due to not passing the End-of-Course exam or make it all the way to their senior year and still be held responsible for passing exams from their freshman year of high school. As a result of grave objections to this decision, the state decided to let school districts decide on the 15% weight of the state assessment (Smith, 2012). Though implementation has been delayed, many districts have decided to allow the End-of-Course to replace final examinations and count for 10-15% of the course average.

According to Jacob and Lefgren (2009) critics argue that “. . . retention will harm those low-achieving students most at-risk for failure” (p.1). With this in mind and in addition to the new accountability system, it is essential that school leaders analyze trends, plan for at-risk students who may be retained, implement immediate interventions, and evaluate current programs. In doing so, school districts can make the arrangements

necessary to address the needs of students by ensuring that there is not a drastic increase in student retention and a severe decrease in high school graduation rates.

### **Limited English Proficient Students**

Race-ethnicity does not have a serious impact on a student's ability to obtain a high school diploma as many would have others believe and is less important than social class (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). The United States has seen a rapid growth in the amount of English language learners over the past decade. Within the last ten years the amount of English language learners enrolled in public schools has increased by approximately 50%. Approximately 10% of the students enrolled in public education use English as a second language, and in the state of Texas that number has jumped to over 14% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

According to a report on English language learners published by *Education Week* "achievement data suggest English-language learners lag far behind their peers" (Aarons, 2001, p.5). Abedi (2004) stated that "LEP students exhibit substantially lower performance than non-LEP students in subject areas high in language demand" (pp. 10-11). School leaders cannot allow LEP students to fall through the cracks. In addition to the standard challenges transitioning students were faced with, LEP students also faced language barriers. Research indicated that students who failed English or mathematics in the ninth grade became less engaged, and had decreased chances of graduating from high school. Therefore, district and school leaders should work to provide more support and learning opportunities for limited English proficient students. The reoccurring theme of building positive relationships with limited English proficient students reinforced the importance of intrapersonal relationships (Andrade, Bartlett, & Michael, 2007; Barona &

Santos de Barona, 2006). Critics like Cadiero-Kaplan and Monroy-Ochoa (2004) argued that English language learners were treated like “second class” citizens in public schools and disappeared through the cracks of the educational system (Derwing & Toohey, 2008). As a result, there was a lack of trust between families and the school system. Educators must make it a priority to form positive relationships with all families and stakeholders in the community. With the best interests of students in mind, school leaders should collaborate with the families of English language learners. Many campuses have decided to provide English as a second language classes for families as a method of attempting to not only build positive relationships with families, but provide educational resources for parents. As schools educate students, providing career development for parents will equip them with the tools needed to nurture their children’s education at home (Carter & Healey, 2012). Calderón, Slavin, and Sánchez (2011) asserted that the most important factor for the academic success of English language learners was the quality of instruction. Investing in the development of parents builds relationships, but investing in the professional development of teachers and staff yields the return of student achievement. It is the responsibility of campus and district leaders to ensure that teachers are knowledgeable of the most effective instructional practices for English language learners. Strongly committed teachers are conscience of the needs of English language learners, differentiate instruction and provide appropriate accommodations (Cho & Reich, 2008). When determining the most effective practices to assist LEP students, school leaders should include ELL components in transition programs. This includes additional support and short-term initiatives within the program which could

positively influence attitudes, behaviors, and academic achievement that supports graduating from high school (Matthews & Mellom, 2012; Adams, 2005).

### **The Graduation Rates of Male Students**

The graduation rates of male students tend to be considerably lower than their female counterparts. More specifically, the graduation rates for African American males continued to lag at least 7% behind females. Ausbrooks and Travis (2012) declared that interventions incorporated with research proven concepts created a school community environment that males responded to. One of the factors which contributed to a student's decision to drop-out of high school was lack of engagement. The lack of motivation and a lower perception of the benefits of graduating from high school were traits of drop-outs (Eckstein, & Wolpin, 1999). There was a strong correlation that existed between low academic achievement and disciplinary infractions. When addressing the needs of transitioning male students school leaders must be mindful when selecting staff to teach ninth grade students. Teachers and staff should demonstrate effective classroom management practices in efforts to decrease the amount of disciplinary referrals. Males made up the highest rates of retained students, expulsions, special education enrollments, and high school drop-outs, but the lowest rates of graduation and gifted and talented enrollment (Garibaldi, 2007). According to Groginsky and MacIver (2011), identifying early warning indicators and developing drop-out prevention programs were steps that would boost graduation rates. The ninth grade was the best time for school leaders to identify at-risk students and provide interventions. This included implementing academic tutoring and supplemental enrichment for struggling students (Piliawsky & Somers, 2004). According to Piliawsky and Somers (2004) "academic tutoring was one way that



at-risk students could obtain assistance to improve academic performance” (p. 18).

Methods of interventions that have been proven effective for struggling students were peer mentoring and academic tutoring, especially in the ninth grade when student were transitioning to “relatively impersonal high school” classrooms (Piliawsky & Somers, 2004, p. 20). The school climate played a significant role in how transitioning students responded to the new changes. Maintaining stable school leadership was important when establishing the cultural climate. Researchers Owens, Piliawsky, and Somers (2008) who specialized in drop-out prevention suggested school leaders

. . . make learning more engaging and help students understand the connection between the world of work and school. Varied instructional styles to accommodate a host of learning styles should be integrated into teaching. Adding support mechanisms for academically struggling students is imperative. These include but are not limited to hiring highly qualified teachers, reducing class sizes, giving more attention to individualized instruction, increasing teacher support, allowing students additional time with teachers, reaching out to parents to improve their relationship with the school, and assuring that students have close ties with one adult in the building with whom they feel they can trust and confide in about school and personal issues. (p. 350)

Though male adolescents demonstrated their frustrations and responded to challenges differently from female adolescents, school leaders should equip themselves with the necessary knowledge base and skills to intervene before it is too late. The increased rigor and academic expectations in schools are to be implemented in such a manner that encourages students to rise to the expectation, not run away from the

challenge. Developing mentoring programs will create a chance to intercede at a time of declining engagement and motivation among adolescent males. Positive mentors can counter the pressure from peer groups that discourage academic success and hard work (Roderick, 2003). The correlation between disengagement and underperformance is far too high to ignore. Developing a system that sustains a web of support that includes personalized support, quality teachers, structured learning environments that maintain consistent expectations of behavior, and actively monitoring student progress will produce positive outcomes. A systemic impact on developing the entire student must occur to obtain not only academic success among students, but boost self-esteem and create intrinsic motivation.

### **Implications for Further Research**

The findings of this study determined that it was inconclusive whether attending a ninth grade campus increased the overall graduation rates of students. Male, English as a second language, and limited English proficient sub-groups of students who attended the ninth grade center had higher graduation rates than students who attended the traditional campus. While the current study added to the body of research regarding the ninth grade transition and best practices, there still remains a demand for research regarding graduation rates. It is recommended that this study be extended in a longitudinal capacity to provide more research and data that explores the most effective practices for transitioning students and increasing graduation rates. Although there is research available regarding the ninth grade transition, a considerable amount of the research did not specifically address graduation rates and was not current enough to relevantly address the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. Various recommendations provided valuable insight to

improve the programs at existing ninth grade campuses and academies to ensure they are effective and guarantee maximal student success (not serving as a means of population control for overcrowded campuses). The following recommendations provided a framework for the development of effective transition programs to ensure academic achievement:

1. Longitudinal research with larger population samples should be conducted to determine if students attending ninth grade campuses have lower retention rates and higher graduation rates. This research will be especially important for school districts with ninth grade campuses to evaluate their effectiveness, and possibly lead to the re-structuring of high schools.
2. Research should be conducted to assess parent perceptions of the ninth grade transition. This includes perceptions of parents in sub-groups such as English language learners, bilingual or English as a second language, economically disadvantaged, and males (all of whom had lower graduation rates than their counterparts).
3. Case studies should be performed to identify the most effective practices that increase the graduation rates of English as a second language students, English language learners and male students.
4. Program evaluations should be conducted to determine the best practices for ninth grade students which might decrease student retention in the ninth grade and promote academic success.

5. Research should be conducted to survey the impact attending and not attending ninth grade campuses has on motivation, engagement, attitudes and behaviors of ninth grade students.
6. It is a recommendation that further examinations of administrator and staff perceptions of the impact of ninth grade centers be conducted.

## **Conclusion**

The transition from middle school to high school is no easy task and school districts across the country are faced with the challenge of easing this transition. Research indicated that the ninth grade was perhaps the most important year to ensure academic success for students. The findings of this longitudinal ex post facto causal quantitative investigation determined there was no significant difference in the total graduation rates of students who attended a stand-alone freshman campus and those who attended a traditional campus.

While striving to bridge the achievement gap, educators must make certain that all populations of students are successful and graduate. High schools must continue their efforts to tackle student attendance and retention in the ninth grade and provide additional support for at-risk students, English language learners, males and economically disadvantaged students. The focus is to address the needs of students regardless of the manner in which the school is structured.

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## APPENDIX A

Approval from the University of Houston Human Subject Research Committee

# UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

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## DIVISION OF RESEARCH

February 6, 2013

Chanel Fields  
c/o Dr. Michael Emerson  
Educational Leadership & Cultural Studies

Dear Chanel Fields,

Based upon your request for exempt status, an administrative review of your research proposal entitled "The Impact of Ninth Grade Campuses on Student Graduation Rates" was conducted on August 22, 2012.

At that time, your request for exemption under Category 4 was approved pending modification of your proposed procedures/documents.

The changes you have made adequately respond to the identified contingencies. As long as you continue using procedures described in this project, you do not have to reapply for review. \* Any modification of this approved protocol will require review and further approval. Please contact me to ascertain the appropriate mechanism.

If you have any questions, please contact Alicia Vargas at (713) 743-9215.

Sincerely yours,



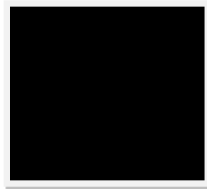
Kirstin Rochford, MPH, CIP, CPIA  
Director, Research Compliance

\*Approvals for exempt protocols will be valid for 5 years beyond the approval date. Approval for this project will expire **August 1, 2017**. If the project is completed prior to this date, a final report should be filed to close the protocol. If the project will continue after this date, you will need to reapply for approval if you wish to avoid an interruption of your data collection.

Protocol Number: 12600-EX

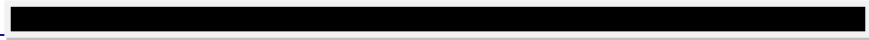


APPENDIX B  
Consent to Conduct Research



**Independent School District**

www.  sd.org





 **Director of Federal  
Programs and Research**

December 10, 2012



RE: Request to conduct research on the graduation rate of high school students

Ms. Fields,

The  ISD Research Committee has approved your request to conduct the above research study. Upon the completion of your research you are required to provide a copy of your study to  ISD.

Sincerely,

