EXAMINING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PARTICIPATION IN A FRESHMAN TRANSITION PROGRAM AND PERSISTENCE TO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

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

by

Kade Allen Griffin

May 2013

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Dedication

For Stephanie,

I never would have been able to complete this journey without your constant love, support, and understanding. Your patience and words of encouragement truly carried me through, and served as my rock during times of self-doubt. You made me believe that I could accomplish this lofty goal, and selflessly gave up time we could be spending together without ever complaining. You are my best friend and I love you more than you can ever imagine. For your love and patience with me during this long process, thank you.

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Abstract

With the increased level of accountability now dominating education in America, administrators are constantly on the lookout for ways to improve their schools. One area of interest is the correlation between success in the ninth grade and long-term high school success. To help achieve ninth grade year success, many school have turned towards freshman transition programs.

The purpose of this study was to examine whether a relationship existed between students participating in a comprehensive freshman transition program and higher persistence in high school graduation. This study examined cohorts of students who completed a comprehensive transition program, and their graduation status after four years of high school.

Four-year cohort graduation status was collected for the two graduating classes before the implementation of the transition program, and for the following three years after implementation of the transition program. This data was compared using a chi-square to test for significance. The results of this study found a significant relationship between participating in the transition program and increased persistence to high school graduation.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The time for reform in American education is now. Simply put, our current educational system is flawed, and needs to be improved upon. The common practices of lecture and rote memorization must be abolished to make way for collaboration and data based strategies. This change must be administered from the top down in every educational setting. Administrators can no longer be simple clerical leaders whose main job is discipline. Administrators in the 21st century must now become leaders of learners (Scherer, 2002). As the instructional leaders of the school their jobs now become much more hands on (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999a). They must ensure that all instruction is geared toward multiple, different, learning styles. This concerted effort is necessary to make sure that all students are successful. The stakes for these administrators have never been higher. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed into law in 2002 in an effort to close the achievement gap between our nation's students. It requires that all children will be proficient in reading and mathematics by the 2013–14 school year (NCLB, 2011). In order to reach this goal all states are required to develop benchmarks that will measure the progress of all students. To ensure that all students are progressing, the data from these benchmarks must be disaggregated into subgroups. This data is held up against a standard known as Adequate Yearly Progress or AYP (NCLB, 2011). "A school or school district that does not meet the state's definition of "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) for two straight years (school-wide or in any subgroup) is considered to be 'in need of improvement'" (DOE, 2003, p.1). These schools must come up with a plan of

intervention or risk school takeover or even school closure. The educational leaders of these schools are tasked with the development of these interventions to make sure that all of their students are being successful. In order for students to truly become successful in today's market place it has become essential that they must have a high school diploma. Others argue that a college degree has become the new norm (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007). This norm has put a tremendous amount of pressure on today's teachers. Teachers, feeling the burden of standardized testing and the oversight of administrators now must work harder than ever before to ensure that all students are learning and learning at relatively high levels. This pressure is also felt by the students in classrooms all across the country. Today's students know that if they do not pass these high stakes tests, they will not be able to continue successfully to the next grade, or ultimately not be able to graduate from high school. The implementation of the State of Texas' STAAR exam has placed even more strain on today's students. Each student in the state of Texas now must pass a total of 15 exams in order to graduate from high school. Each test score is cumulative and students must retake exams that they do not pass. This means that a student who failed the algebra 1 test must retake the exam even though they have moved on to the geometry class. The fear of not being successful makes the transition from junior high to high school even more stressful.

An adolescent's journey from junior high to high school elicits strong emotions varying from euphoric excitement to debilitating dread. This transition is viewed by the adolescent as an opportunity to develop increasing levels of independence and autonomy while learning how to mature emotionally and physically into the adults they will become (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Mizelle, 2005). It should come as no surprise then that there are

vast amounts of research that show how important freshman year is to the academic, social, and emotional well-being of a child (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Lan & Lanthier, 2003). One of the most troubling problems associated with freshman year of high school are the effects that freshman year has on graduation and completion rates. According to Hertzog and Morgan (1999b), "Students will decide during the first few weeks of their freshman year if they intend to continue their high school education" (p. 27). Since the freshman year of high school has been targeted as a vital year to the success of student's overall academic livelihood, schools have become increasingly concerned with how to make the transition into freshman year run more smoothly (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007).

Problems in the Ninth Grade

One of the major problems that students face in their freshman year is the lack of support that they are used to receiving while in junior high (Hertzog, 2006). The level of parental support, individual counseling, and peer grouping all too often disappears once they walk through the high school's doors (Lampert, 2005). The sheer number of students in a high school makes this type of one on one attention that students are used to receiving in the much smaller junior highs almost impossible. Students also lack the ability to cope with the demands of the increased level or rigor in high school classrooms (Bottoms & Timberlake, 2007). In a 2006 survey, Bridgeland, Morison, & DiIulio (2006) reported that 45% of dropouts surveyed believed that they entered high school unprepared for rigorous study. This inability to handle the coursework has led to the 9th grade year to have the highest failure and dropout rates of any other grade level (Morgan & Hertzog, 2001). According to Dedmond and Lafauci (2006) "when middle level

students experience a variety of programs such as social support, orientation to the next school, peer interaction and curriculum information as well as academic support, fewer students are retained in ninth grade (p. 1)". Another growing problem at the ninth grade level is the trend of the least effective and newest teachers being placed at the ninth grade level. Schools tend to have an unspoken system of seniority where the most effective teachers get placed with the higher grade levels and "honors" courses (Donegan, 2008). These teachers are rewarded with the "better" students while the 9th grade as a whole suffers (Bottoms &Timberlake 2007). This system further exasperates the problem by providing struggling students with the teachers that are least capable of helping them. This situation causes a sense of hopelessness in high school freshman that has caused ninth grade to have higher dropout rates than any other grade (Bridgeland, Morison, & DiIulio, 2006).

Economic Effects of Dropping Out

"More than 1.2 million U. S. high school student's dropout every year---roughly 7,000 each school day" (Wise, 2008, p. 8). The economic impact of dropouts is felt not only by the student but also by the State as well. A study completed in (2009) by the National Center for Educational Statistics (Chapman et. al.) found that the median income a person age 18-67 will receive who had not completed high school was approximately $25,000, while a person age 18-67 median income who completed high school, even with a General Education Development (GED) certificate was close to $43,000 (Chapman et. al, 2009). This difference will account for a potential loss of $630,000 loss of income over a person's lifetime that does not complete high school compared to someone with some type of high school credential (Chapman et. al., 2009).

The effect on the state is even more staggering. In a study done by Levin and Belfield (2007), when a comparison is made between students who drop out of high school and those that complete we find that an average high school dropout costs the economy roughly $240,000 over their lifetime. This is due in part to lower tax contributions, higher reliance on welfare including Medicare and Medicaid, and higher instances of criminal activity (Levin & Belfield, 2007). A study done by Gottlob (2007) found that the average dropout can cause the Texas state economy between $3000 and $5000 a year.

Freshman Transition Programs

The effects of students dropping out can be felt at the national, state, and local levels. This has led to many school districts searching for ways to help fix their dropout problem. Since a relationship has been observed between freshman year failure rates and dropout rates, many school districts have begun looking for ways improve freshman success (Dedmond & LaFauci, 2006). In an effort to improve the freshman year experience for all students, some schools have developed varying levels of freshman year transition programs (Smith, 1997). These programs vary in complexity from one-day orientations to four yearlong programs that are closely monitored (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999b). The one day orientation programs tend to focus on the logistics of being in high school (getting class schedules, maps of the school building, school tours, etc.), while the longer programs tend to be more focused on relationship building (peer grouping, team teaching, mentoring, tutoring, etc.) (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999b). The pressure felt by schools to improve their graduation rates and completion rates have caused transition programs to be adopted all over the country, with varying levels of success. While it has been noted that no one single program or practice can significantly reduce dropout rates

(Bergenson, 2003), studies on transition programs have reported that longer more comprehensive programs yielded the lowest drop-out rates among students in any type of transition program (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999b). Research has shown the impact of these programs to have long lasting results. According to Mizelle (2005), "With the proper resources and support, the impact of a freshmen transition program goes beyond a student's freshmen year in high school" (p. 58).

Griffin High School

Griffin High School is located in TEXASISD, a medium-sized district located in East Texas. The population of first time freshman students varies from year to year in Griffin High School, but during the research years of 2003-2011 the number of first time freshman in the school of study varied from 946 to 619.

Table 1.1

Griffin High School Enrollment Figures

School Year	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011
Total School Population	2414	2624	2839	2905	3002	2387	2334	2267
9^{th} Grade Population	740	946	913	885	928	664	731	619

Note. This information was obtained from the TEXASISD student information systems (2011). The declining enrollment beginning in the 2008-09 school year can be attributed the addition on a new third high school being built in TEXASISD. The student population at Griffin High School has remained constant, and has maintained the same basic ratio of total population to 9^{th} grade population.

The freshman year transition program in TEXASISD is named the ninth grade initiative. The ninth grade initiative has many different facets. The first part of the ninth grade initiative is a weeklong orientation for incoming freshman known as “Fish Camp”. This orientation seeks to inform incoming freshman of the many logistical aspects of entering high school. Students are taken on tours of the facility, and are given the schedules for the first day of school. Students are given their id badges, and spend time in workshops on effective note-taking strategies, and presentations on the extracurricular opportunities at each high school. It is also a time for the schools to introduce the students to their freshman level teams, and teachers.

Pure, collaborative teaming is the second aspect of the ninth grade initiative. Each first time ninth grader is placed into a team of common core ninth grade teachers. These teams follow the Small Learning Community (SLC) framework. These teams allow teachers to become more familiar with the problems that every student is facing by creating schools within schools. These schools within schools operate on the same campus, and are usually designed to be whole wings of the building that contain only freshmen teachers. The freshmen team teachers can work together to find what works best for each student. This system makes it very difficult for any one student to fall through the cracks by making the same teachers be responsible for a smaller group of students. These teacher teams are given common planning periods where they can discuss student issues across content areas.

Another aspect of the ninth grade initiative is the “Pyramid of Intervention for Learning”. This framework was designed to have plan in place for any student who needs intervention.

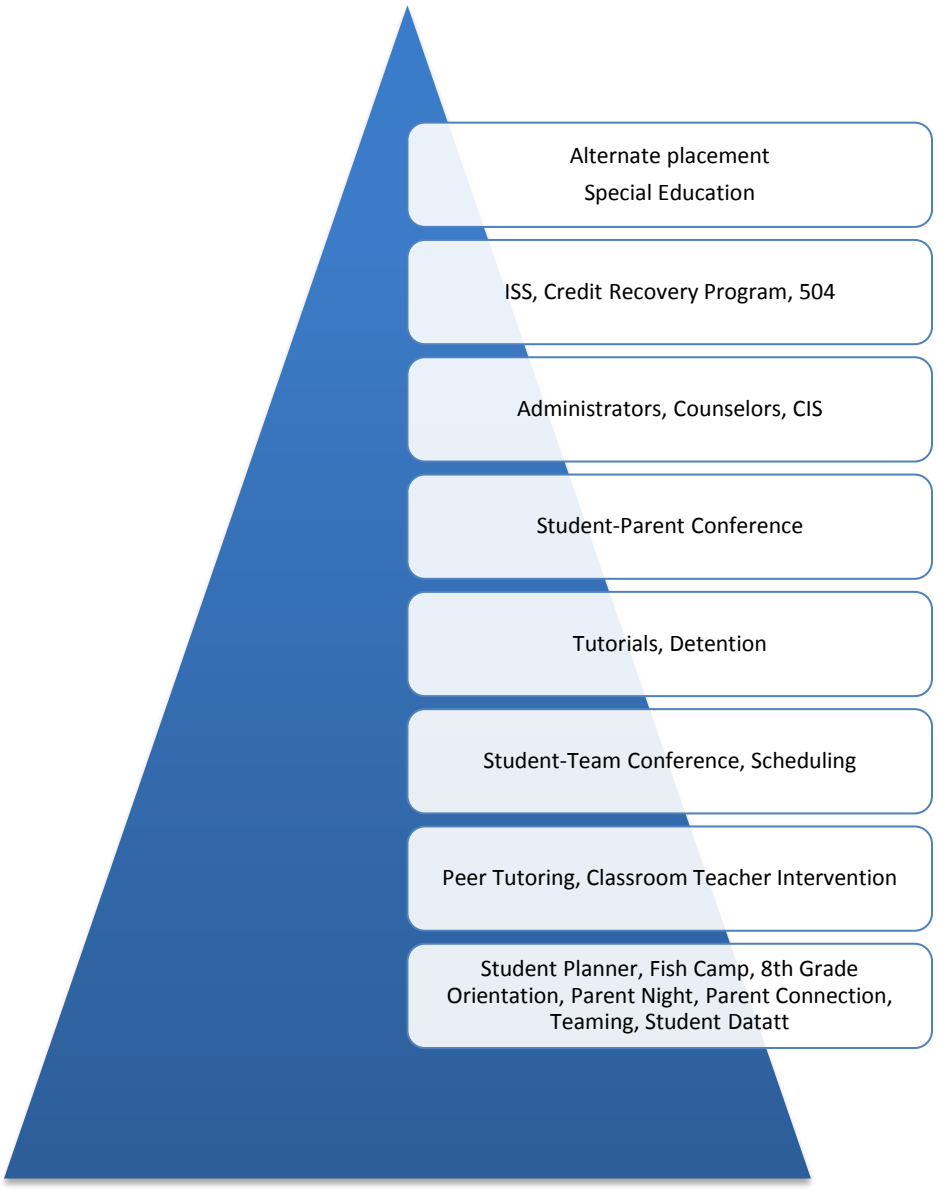

Illustration 1.1. Griffin high school Pyramid of Intervention for learning. This was adapted from the Griffin High School Ninth Grade Initiative 2011 staff workshop materials. The pyramid of intervention to learning is used by all staff at Griffin High school to help students that are struggling. It gives any staff member the steps that they should follow when a student is not being successful.

This pyramid was created to give all staff members a framework to consult in the event a student needs intervention. The intervention can be something as simple as requiring a student to complete a weekly planner, to something much more intensive like having a student become enrolled in Griffin High School's credit recovery program. The credit recovery program at Griffin High School is called Odyssey. This program takes place in a computer lab, and allows for accelerated lessons for a student to earn credit quicker than they could in a regular classroom.

The final aspect of the ninth grade initiative is the inclusion of every freshman student to be a part of some type of extracurricular activity. The students are given the opportunity to join an already existing organization or try to create one of their own. The organizations can be in the form of a club or sports group, and help the students form a connection to the school. The hope is that this type of connection will stay with the student throughout their high school career.

Statement of the Problem

A certain level of accountability now pervades all aspects of education. If a school fails to meet the prescribed level of standards, as outlined by NCLB that school runs the risk of intervention and possible school closure. It is this level of urgency that makes this study important to educational leaders. There have been studies that examine the effects of freshman year transition programs on freshman success, but studies that examine the long term success of these students is lacking. This study tries to examine to what extent a freshman transition program truly transitions students to be successful throughout high school.

Purpose of the Study

The major focus of this study was to examine if the implementation of a freshman year transition program would have a significant relationship with long-term student success as measured by drop-out rate, four-year graduation rate, and continuation rate. The hope of this study would be that the ninth grade transition program would decrease the dropout rate, increase the four-year graduation rate, and improve the cohort continuation rate thereby increasing persistence to graduation. Another focus of this study was to examine if there is any statistically significant relationship between students who participate in this program and the persistence to graduation of the Hispanic and economically disadvantaged subpopulations for the school of study. These two subpopulations are on the rise in the school of study, and across the nation. The success of these two subpopulations is sometimes the difference between if a school is labeled as acceptable or in need of intervention. The results of this study can help all stakeholders examine the effects a successful transition program can have on student's persistence to graduation.

Research Questions

This study was developed to analyze the relationship that Griffin High School's ninth grade initiative program would have on persistence to high school graduation. The following were the research questions that were addressed and answered as a part of this study.

1. Does a significant relationship exist between the implementation and participation in TEXASISD's comprehensive ninth grade transition program at Griffin High School and persistence to high school graduation?

2. Does a significant relationship exist between the implementation and participation in TEXASISD's comprehensive ninth grade transition program at Griffin High School's Hispanic subpopulation and persistence toward high school graduation?
3. Does a significant relationship exist between the implementation and participation in TEXASISD's comprehensive ninth grade transition program at Griffin High School's economically disadvantaged subpopulation and persistence toward high school graduation?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses and null hypotheses were formulated to determine the effect that a freshman transition program had on long-term student success:

Hypothesis #1. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade transition program will show a significant relationship in the persistence to high school graduation of Griffin High School.

Null hypothesis #1.1 Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade transition program will show no significant change in the persistence to high school graduation of Griffin High School.

Hypothesis #2. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade transition program will show a significant change in persistence to high school graduation for the Hispanic subpopulation of Griffin High School.

Null hypothesis# 2.1. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade initiative program will show no significant change in the

persistence to high school graduation for the Hispanic subpopulation of Griffin High School.

Hypothesis #3. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade initiative program will show a significant change in the persistence to high school graduation for the economically disadvantaged subpopulation of Griffin High School.

Null hypothesis #3.1. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade initiative program will show no significant change in the persistence to high school graduation for the economically disadvantaged subpopulation of Griffin High School.

Definition of Terms

The following are the definitions to the key terms included in this study. While this is not a comprehensive list, it is a list of terms not commonly known by the general public or is specific to this study.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): "Under the NCLB, each State establishes a definition of 'adequate yearly progress' (AYP) to use each year to determine the achievement of each school district and school. The new definition of AYP is diagnostic in nature, and intended to highlight where schools need improvement and should focus their resources. The statute gives States and local educational agencies significant flexibility in how they direct resources and tailor interventions to the needs of individual schools identified for improvement. Under the NCLBA, schools are held accountable for the achievement of all students, not just average student performance" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002a).

Continuation rate: Reflects the percentage of students from a class of beginning ninth graders who, by the fall a year or more after their anticipated graduation date, graduate, remain enrolled, or receive GED certificates.

Completion rate: This figure represents the percentage of students who complete graduation in four years.

Credit recovery program: This a program that is designed to speed up the time it takes for a student to obtain credit for a course. For the purposes of this study, this is done by taking condensed online courses in a school computer lab.

Dropout: A dropout is a student who is enrolled in Texas public school in grades 7-12, does not return to Texas public school the following fall, is not expelled, and does not graduate, receive a GED, continue high school outside the Texas public school system or begin college, or die (TEA, 2011).

Dropout rate: The dropout rate is a figure that depicts what percentage of students who once enrolled in public school in Grades 7-12, does not return to public school the following fall, is not expelled, and does not: graduate, receive a GED certificate, continue school outside the public school system, begin college, or die.

Economically Disadvantaged: For the purposes of this study economically disadvantaged is defined as any student who receives free or reduced-price school lunches, or if they qualify for other public assistance.

Extra-curricular activity: For the purposes of this study extracurricular activities are defined as any school sanctioned after school activity.

First-Time Freshman: A first time freshman is a student who is entering freshman year in the fall for the first time.

Fish camp: For the purpose of this study fish camp will be defined as a week-long orientation held to help freshmen become acclimated to their new school. This week-long orientation includes, campus tours, meetings with teachers, and informational sessions on how to be successful in high school.

Four year graduation rate: This rate is the percentage of students who enter high school and graduate four years later.

General Education Development (GED) certificate: High school diploma equivalency that may be earned instead of graduating from high school.

Griffin High School: Griffin High School is the school of study for this research project. It is located in East Texas in a medium sized town located right outside of a major metropolitan area.

Link Crew: Link crew is developed to be a comprehensive transition program that "links" entering freshman with upper classmen in mentor type of role. These mentors help the entering freshman with any difficulties they may be having transitioning into the high school experience.

Ninth grade initiative: The ninth grade initiative is TEXASISD's freshman transition program. It was developed to improve the number of students who pass all four core areas during their ninth grade year of high school.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): "The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the main federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school. Proposed by President Bush, NCLB was signed into law on January 8, 2002. NCLB has built on four principles: accountability for results, more choices for parents, greater local control and flexibility,

and an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

On track/ off track for graduation: For the purposes of this study being on track to graduation means having the prescribed number of credits at the end of each grade level. These measurements are used to determine what grade a student is placed in.

Pyramid of Intervention: For the purposes of this study, the pyramid of intervention is a system that was established by Griffin High School to be used as a tool for all school personnel for when a student needs intervention. It has varying levels of intervention, and is designed to increase the level of intervention as student progresses through it.

Small Learning Community (SLC): For the purposes of this study a small learning community refers to the practice of creating smaller organizations within a school to improve relationships between students and their teachers.

Stand-Alone Freshmen Academy: For the purposes of this study a stand-alone freshman academy is a building that is separate in location from a traditional comprehensive high school. This school isolates the freshmen class from the rest of the high school and provides support to the students in their transition to high school. It is a relatively new concept, but is growing in popularity around the country.

Talent Development High Schools (TDHS): A ninth grade intervention program that targets acceleration in the areas of math and reading.

Texas Education Agency (TEA): This is the department of education for the state of Texas. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) is the administrative unit for primary and secondary public education. Agency responsibilities include:

- managing the textbook adoption process;
- overseeing development of the statewide curriculum;
- administering the statewide assessment program;
- administering a data collection system on public school students, staff, and finances;
- rating school districts under the statewide accountability system;
- operating research and information programs;
- monitoring for compliance with federal guidelines; and
- serving as a fiscal agent for the distribution of state and federal funds. (TEA, 2011)

TEXASISD: TEXASISD is a medium-sized school district located in East Texas. It provides comprehensive K-12 education.

Transition: For the purposes of this study the transition period is the movement from 8th grade to the status of first-time freshman.

Limitations

"When a study has internal validity, it means that any relationship observed between two or more variables should be unambiguous as to what it means rather than being due to something else." (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 166). This study used Fraenkel and Wallen's twelve possible threats to internal validity for its framework of limitations.

Subject characteristics: The subject characteristics were a threat to internal validity. The various differences of the population such gender, ethnicity, and level of intelligence could not be controlled.

The major threat to the internal validity of a causal-comparative study is the possibility of a subject characteristic threat. Because the researcher had no say in either the selection or formation of the comparison groups, there is always the likelihood that the groups are not equivalent on one or more important variables other than the identified group membership variable. (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 367)

Location: There were no threats to location in this study.

History: A historical threat to the study happened in the fall of 2008 when a third high school in TEXASISD opened its doors. This divided the student population in TEXASISD, and could affect areas of instruction and school culture.

Mortality: The loss of subjects in the study was not a threat to internal validity. "In studies comparing groups, loss of subjects probably will not be a problem if the loss is about the same in all groups" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 168). There were not any significant changes in the number of subjects in the study.

Instrumentation: This was not a threat to the internal validity of this study.

Data collector characteristics: This was not a threat to internal validity because all data was archival, and collected from a database.

Data collector bias: This was not a threat to internal validity because all data was archival, and collected from a database.

Testing: This was not a threat to internal validity, because a test was not administered.

Maturation: Maturation was not a threat to internal validity because the students will be placed into cohort graduation classes that spent all four years at the same high school.

Attitude of subject: This was a threat to the internal validity of the study. Student attitude is an important factor of whether or not a student will drop out of school, and has an impact on a student's desire to finish school on time.

Implementation: This was a threat to internal validity because there was no way to control how the teachers at the school of study implemented the program.

Regression: This was not considered a threat to internal validity because the previous measures were from a different group of students.

Summary

Chapter one has served as the introduction to this study. The background of ninth grade transition programs was introduced, and the purpose of the study was discussed. The research questions were also introduced as well as a definition of terms. In Chapter two the review of pertinent literature to the study will be discussed at length. Chapter three is the methodology chapter of this study, in which the independent and dependent variables will be discussed, and what methods will be used to carry out the statistical analysis. Chapter four contains the results from the study, and chapter five contains the analysis of those findings.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The beginning of high school is an important milestone in every adolescent's life. They will spend their time learning to grow academically and socially into the adults that they will become. Although this is a period of self-discovery for the adolescent, it is not a journey that they can complete on their own. In order to be successful in their ninth grade year they will need the help of their peers, teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents (Herlihy, 2007). The ninth grade year historically wasn't always a part of a traditional high school. It wasn't until the Middle School movement of the 1960's and 1970's that most high schools adopted the ninth grade year leaving newly formed "middle schools" with the 6-8 grade structure. Kerr (2002) states:

> The decision to move ninth graders out of the middle level school was most often made for practical reasons, such as to make room for the influx of sixth graders being moved to the new middle level. Therefore, while ninth graders have been firmly situated at the high school level for over three decades, educators continue to question the best placement for ninth graders in the organizational framework of schooling. (p. 5)

The importance of this transition is not lost on the educational reform and research community. "The current high school reform movement has drawn attention to practices that schools might use to ease ninth graders' transition into high school" (Legters & Kerr, 2001). Educational leaders need to make sure that the transition that they are providing for their students is not just a program that will make students pass the

ninth grade. This transition needs to be designed to make students learn the skills necessary to be successful throughout their entire high school experience. This literature review was conducted to examine transition programs for the ninth grade. It focuses on the problems associated with the ninth grade year of high school and how transition programs have been implemented to help fix these issues.

Ninth Grade Year

There is a lot research to support the idea that the ninth grade has become the make or break year for high school success (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Dedmond & LaFauci, 2006). Students are bombarded with new academic and social pressures that they are usually not ready for. These issues vary from the pressure to succeed in their classes to things like being able to open their locker (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). These fears add to the pressure of being a ninth grader, before their classes even begin. It is also during this period that ninth grade students go from being at the top of the junior high structure to the bottom of the high school structure. Students who were used to being the quasi-rulers of a school find themselves as the new lowly serfs in a strange kingdom. Roeser et al. (1999) summed this feeling up when he stated:

> Peer networks can be disrupted by the size and educational stratification of these institutions; and they can lose status as they go from being the oldest in the middle school to the youngest in the high school setting. For some, these changes can overtax their capacity to cope, thereby compromising academic and emotional functioning. (p. 141)

This is also generally the first time that students are confronted with the pressure of choice (Mizzelle & Irvin, 2000). Students are allowed to choose the extracurricular

activities that they want to participate in and in some cases the level of difficulty of their courses. These pressures are further intensified by the fact that students find themselves in a larger environment with a reduction in personal support (Smith, 2007) and by the possibility that the level of rigor in their junior high courses did not adequately prepare them for the rigors of high school (Dedmond & Lafauci, 2006; Neild & Balfanz, 2006). An article by George (1999) emphasized the current state of middle school education effect on high school success when he stated:

> I urge the next generation of middle school educators to help save the ninth grade. The middle school concept has, too often, not been able to fulfill its announced intention to make the transition to high school a smooth and successful experience. In fact, the transition to high school has never been more treacherous nor the consequences more personally disastrous for so many. All over America, thousands and thousands of ninth graders are and have been painfully failing. We can no longer allow all the good work you do in middle schools to evaporate in the first six weeks of high school. (p. 2)

In 2006, a national survey was completed by Bottoms and Timberlake to answer the following five questions:

- Are students enrolled in the right courses that will enable them to achieve their postsecondary goals?
- Do ninth-grade students feel prepared to succeed in rigorous high school studies and are they engaged in completing challenging assignments?

- Do ninth-grade students possess the literacy and numeracy skills needed to succeed in challenging high school studies?
- Do ninth-grade students possess the independent learning skills required for success?
- Are students getting the extra help they need to pass challenging courses and the guidance they need to set and achieve postsecondary goals?

The study found that the needs of the freshman surveyed were not being met. Of the students surveyed, low percentages were being placed in college preparatory classes and many students felt that they weren't enrolled in rigorous courses that would prepare them for further study. Maybe more startling was the fact that less than 50% of the participating students had an adult mentor or adviser that they could go to for assistance (2006). These issues are important because of the relationship between success in the ninth grade and graduation. Today's students in many cases are not being pushed to pursue the types of rigorous academic experiences that will make the successful in high school and sets them up for failure in higher education. Another important aspect of success in the ninth grade is attendance. Studies have shown that the attendance level of students during the first 30 days of their ninth grade year is a stronger indicator of if a student will drop out than any other predictor from eighth grade, including test scores, other academic achievement, and age (Jerald, 2006, Neild & Balfanz, 2006). When you consider that attendance is the strongest indicator of whether or not a student will drop out of high school, it makes the importance of finding out why students are being absent even more essential. In order to do that relationships must be developed between students

and faculty. Ensuring that students don't have chronic absenteeism is one of the best ways to keep students on track at the end of their ninth grade year. A study completed for the Regional Education Laboratory Southwest set out to answer the following questions:

- How do students who are classified as on track and those who are classified as off track at the end of grade 9 differ in on- time graduation rates?
- How do students in specific subgroups who are classified as on track and those who are classified as off track at the end of grade 9 differ in on-time graduation rates? (Hartman et al., 2011)

The study analyzed the on-track off-track data from five different districts in the state of Texas to determine whether on-track in the ninth grade could be used as an indicator of on-track to four year graduation (Hartman et. al., 2011). For Griffin High School a student is considered to be on track if at the end of their ninth grade year they have obtained 6 credits. To be placed in the 11 grade they must have 12, and to become a senior they must have a total of 19. The following are the major results of that study:

- In all five districts, a majority of first-time grade 9 students were on track for graduation at the end of grade 9. On-track rates ranged from 61.2 percent to 86.0 percent.
- In all five districts, on-time graduation rates were higher for students who were on track at the end of grade 9 than for students who were off track. In four districts, the difference between on-time graduation rates for on-track and off-track students was 36.1–51.7 percentage points; the fifth district had a difference of 18.4 percentage points.

- Across districts, variability among racial/ ethnic groups was greater for off-track graduation rates than for on-track graduation rates. For all racial/ethnic groups, the on-time graduation rate was higher for on-track students than for off-track students. (Hartman et al., 2011)

This study is useful because it gives a base to the claim that being successful in the ninth grade is correlated to being successful in high school. A hole in this research that would make it more applicable to my study would be to examine the number of students who although weren't "on-track" for four year graduation did end up continuing and graduating in the following year. It would also be useful if the research also accounted for economically disadvantaged students.

The impact that high school transition has affects students at all ability levels. A study completed by Joshua Smith (2006) examined the impacts that achievement loss during high school transition has on long-term student success. Smith conducted a logistic regression analysis to examine whether achievement loss in the transition to high school predicted attrition in the middle students who were classified as high achievers. To accomplish this task he examined the data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, Fourth Follow-Up, and 2000 (NELS:88/2000), all of which were completed by the National Center for Education Statistics in the Department of Education. Smith concluded that "Although high-achieving students were less likely to leave their first college than the non-high-achieving students in the overall sample, achievement loss in high school transition was a strong predictor of high-achieving students subsequently leaving college"(Smith J. S, 2006, p.218). So even students who

have historically been high achieving can have long lasting problems associated with their transition into high school.

Perceptions of the Ninth Grade

These pressures have led to ninth graders and their parents to form certain perceptions about the entrance to the ninth grade. In 2004, Akos & Galassi completed a study on the perceptions of ninth grade transitions from the teacher, student, and parent perspective. This study found that there was very little consistency in the things that students anticipated or feared in regards to entering the ninth grade. In fact, making new friends was the only response that was common to all three groups. Student anticipation and concerns dealt more with the ability to fit in and thrive in the ninth grade, while parents and teacher believed that students were more worried about the academic pressures associated with high school (2004). This research can be extremely useful to educational leaders in their attempt to build successful, efficient transition programs for their high schools. Including teachers and parents in the creation of transition programs would make them more effective by examining broader issues that students will face in their transition to high school. The fear and pressures that can be associated with the ninth grade crosses many demographics including gender. Queen (2002) states:

> At one time females had the most difficulty with the transition to high school, but with the age of terrorism and school violence, the anxiety has balanced equally to males and females. Peer relations are extremely important to both male and female students. Upon entering the high school, students of both genders often find it extremely difficult to adjust because their friendship circle has been disconnected. (p. 3)

A study completed by Smith (2007) showed that in order to improve the perceptions of ninth grade transition, schools should implement specific academic programs, extracurricular activities, and other support systems that address achievement gaps between black and white students and between boys and girls, in specific content areas.

Statistical Problems in the Ninth Grade

The sometimes crippling effect that perceptions have on students only make the statistics associated with the ninth grade even more concerning. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) state the following:

> Ninth graders have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, the majority of failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than any other high school grade level. The 9th grade also has the highest enrollment rate in high schools, mainly due to the fact that approximately 22% of students repeat 9th-grade classes. (p. 60)

The problems generally become even more staggering when you only examine urban school districts. "Researchers at Johns Hopkins University found that up to 40% of ninth grade students in cities with the highest dropout rates repeat the ninth grade, but only 10–15% of those repeaters go on to graduate (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004). Some reports have even shown the dropout rate to exceed 50% in urban school districts (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). The problem must seem overwhelming to a student who watches half of their friends and classmates not make it year in and year out. This dropout rate becomes even more troubling when you consider the size of the population

these districts are accountable for. This means that thousands of students are being left behind from each grade cohort every year. Some states even report as high as 20% reduction in their enrollment from ninth to the tenth grade (Wheelock and Miao, 2005). One reason for this high percentage is the high number of students who are not passing their classes in the ninth grade. It has been noted that the majority of students who drop out of high school fail at least 25% of their courses in the ninth grade (Letgers & Kerr, 2001). One reason for this is many ninth grade students are entering high school without the necessary academic skills needed to be successful. It was noted by Neild and Balfanz (2006), that in nonselective urban high schools, a majority of students entered the ninth grade with academic skills several years below grade level. This problem can be worsened by ninth grade teachers who are either unprepared and/or unwilling to teach basic skills to their students (Balfanz, McPartland, & Shaw, 2002). Ninth graders are often left at a handicap because of the status system alive in most schools. When the least desirable teaching assignments are left for the newest teachers (Kurz, 1987), ninth graders are left with teachers who are often the newest to the profession, newest to the school, and newly certified, than students of the upper-grade levels (Neild & Farley, 2005). This hierarchy is prevalent in most high schools. Allowing the most inexperienced teachers to teach the students who need the most help is one of the most detrimental aspects of any high school (Bottoms &Timberlake 2007).

Graduation Rates

There are few statistics more important to the educational world than that of the graduation rate. What better figure to determine the effectiveness of a school than the amount of students who actually successfully leave their halls? Currently, about one-third

of students do not graduate with a diploma within four years of entering high school (Richmond, 2009). It is necessary here to distinguish between what actually constitutes the graduation rate. The figure itself has gone over intense scrutiny over the past 10 years. Before the implementation of NCLB in 2002, there was no federal regulation that required schools to even report a graduation rate, let alone use it as some type of accountability measure (Alliance for Excellent, 2009). With the implementation of NCLB in 2002, States, Districts, and High schools were required by law to calculate and report their graduation rates overall, and by subgroup for the first time in history (Richmond, 2009). The problem with graduation rates in NCLB was in the way that the law defined what a graduation rate was. The definition in NCLB reads as follows: "The percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years" (NCLB). This definition left some things up to interpretation and caused many states to calculate their graduation rate differently than other states (Richmond, 2009). These varied and often unreliable measures made the graduation rate a nonfactor in a schools ability to meet AYP (Richmond, 2009). This all changed in 2005 with the signing of National Governor's Association (NGA) Compact by all 50 state governors. The agreement was a pledge by all 50 governors to require their states to compute a common graduation rate known as the 4 year cohort graduation rate (Alliance for Excellent, 2009). This rate calculated the number of students who entered the ninth grade, and then graduated with a diploma four years later adjusted by removing students who have transferred out or died and by adding students who have transferred in at some point over the four years (Richmond, 2009).

Graduation Rate **for Class of 2007–08 =**	# of GRADUATES from the ADJUSTED COHORT _____ ADJUSTED COHORT The adjusted cohort = first-time ninth graders in 2003–04 minus (TRANSFERS OUT) plus (TRANSFERS IN) minus (DEATHS)

Illustration 2.1. The NGA 2005 Compact Formula. This illustration notes the NGA Compact Rate's basic formula measures the proportion of students in the adjusted cohort of first-time entering ninth graders who have graduated four years later. The cohort is adjusted by removing students who have transferred out or died and by adding students who have transferred in at some point over the four years.

The compact also allows states to further adjust their cohorts, if they wish, to give special education students and recent immigrants with limited English proficiency more time to graduate (Richmond, 2009).

Since the adjustment of the cohort rates was left up to the discretion of the states, the formulas became very state specific, and in reality caused the variation that the compact was trying to fix (Alliance for Excellent, 2009). In 2008, the Federal department of education enacted legislation to finally make the graduation rate a uniform formula that would be used nationwide (Richmond, 2009). The formula known as the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate is actually very similar to the one set up in the NGA

compact, with a few differences. The main difference is the clarification of many of the details left open by the NGA compact. It also requires that all school use this measure by the 2010-2011 school year, and that this measure will be used to determine AYP by the 2011-2012 school year (Alliance for Excellent, 2009). Another important component of the 2008 federal legislation is the development of an extended-year cohort graduation rate. This rate is measured the same as the four-year but allows the school to determine how many students are graduating in 5, 6, or 7 years since their entrance into high school (Richmond, 2009). Even with the varying measures for graduation rate, it can be easily assumed "with reasonable confidence that roughly three of every 10 students in the United States are not graduating from high school on time" (Belfield and Levin 2007, p. 6). For the first time in national history educational leaders can compare graduation data, and know that the data comparisons can be valuable and meaningful. Currently, the graduation rates in America hover around 70 percent (Richmond, 2009). The following table gives the graduation rate percentages for the various subpopulations in the State of Texas for the graduating class of 2010 and 2011.

Table 2.1

Grade 9 Longitudinal Graduation Rate (%), by Race/Ethnicity and Economic Status, Texas Public Schools, Class of 2010 and Class of 2011

Group	Graduated Class of 2010	Graduated Class of 2011
African American	78.8%	80.9%
American Indian	84.2%	86.6%
Asian/Pacific Islander	93.8%	95%
Hispanic	78.8%	81.8%
White	91.6%	92%
Economically disadvantaged	81.9%	83.7%
State	84.3%	85.9%

Note. Parts may not add to 100 percent because of rounding. Racial groups (African American, American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, and White) do not include students of Hispanic ethnicity. (TEA, 2012) This chart illustrates the problems that we are facing in Texas with student graduation rate. There is a large gap between minorities in the state's graduation rate.

Dropouts and Dropout Rates

Another way of examining the success of a school is to examine its dropout rate. Some special attention is needed here to actually examine the term dropout. A dropout is a student who is enrolled in Texas public school in grades 7-12, does not return to Texas public school the following fall, is not expelled, and does not graduate, receive a GED, continue high school outside the Texas public school system or begin college, or die (TEA, 2011). More than 1 million students in the United States drop out of high school

every year (Balfanz et. al., 2012). Students drop out of high school for a variety of reasons. However, some studies show that these students believe that with the right interventions they had the ability to complete their high school diploma. The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts, a study completed by Bridgeland, DiJulion, and Morison analyzed focus group studies of students who had dropped out of high school. "The central message of this report is that while some students drop out because of significant academic challenges, most dropouts are students who could have, and believe they could have, succeeded in school" (2006, p.iii). This study found that the following were the top five reasons students dropped out of high school:

- They were bored with school (47%)
- They had missed too many days and could not catch up (43%)
- They spent time with people who were not interested in school (42%)
- They had too much freedom and not enough rules in their lives (38%)
- They were failing classes, and didn't believe they could pass (35%)

What is most intriguing about this study is that 71% of students in the study stated that they started becoming disinterested with school in the ninth and tenth grade. Early detection of these issues could have proven to be paramount to these students actually succeeding in high school. Bridgeland, DiJulion and Morison noted that 58 percent of students in the study dropped out with just two years or less to complete high school, but 70 percent were confident they could have graduated from high school had they chosen to. One way to examine how to fix the issue of dropouts is to listen to the dropouts

themselves. The participants in the study also gave suggestions as to how to improve the school experience to help decrease the number of dropouts that a school will have.

- Improve teaching and curricula to make school more relevant and engaging and enhance the connection between school and work.
- Improve instruction and access to supports for struggling students
- Build a school climate that fosters academics.
- Ensure strong adult-students relationships within the school.
- Improve communication between parents and schools.

All of these issues have the ability to be addressed with the implementation of an effective transition program. A bigger problem with dropout rates may be the effect that they have on accountability. All educational leaders work within the confines of an accountability standard set up by NCLB. This standard no matter how well intentioned may not produce an environment that is conducive to making educational leaders want to go out of their way to help dropouts. A state's calculation of AYP is based primarily on academic standards (National Governors Association, 2011). Since these students have not had the same level of instruction as other students their ability to achieve at a proficient level is greatly diminished, and may lead some school leaders to not work very hard to bring these dropouts back into their campuses. The following table gives the dropout rate percentages for the various subpopulations in the State of Texas for the graduating class of 2010 and 2011.

Table 2.2

Grade 9 Longitudinal Dropout Rate (%), by Race/Ethnicity and Economic Status, Texas Public Schools, Class of 2010 and Class of 2011

Group	Dropped-out Class of 2010	Dropped-out Class of 2011
African American	11.8%	10.9%
American Indian	5.1%	6.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.3%	1.4%
Hispanic	9.6%	8.7%
White	3.5%	3.4%
Economically disadvantaged	7.8%	7.7%
State	7.3%	6.8%

Note. Parts may not add to 100 percent because of rounding. Racial groups (African American, American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, and White) do not include students of Hispanic ethnicity. (TEA, 2012) The gap between minorities and other subpopulations is glaring in the states dropout rate.

Continuation Rate

Another option for high school students who don't graduate in four years is to return to school in order to finish or attempt to obtain a GED. These students are known in Texas as continuers. A student is classified as a continuer if he or she is not a graduate and is reported as enrolled in the Texas public school system in the fall after his or her anticipated graduation (Texas Education Agency, 2011). The Texas Education Agency

releases a report known as the "Secondary Schools Completion and Dropouts in Texas Public Schools" report annually. This report disaggregates the completion and dropout rate data for the entire state. 7.2 percent of the students in the class of 2010 continued in high school after their anticipated graduation date (TEA, 2011). By the fall of 2010, the five-year graduation rate for the class of 2009 was 85.1 percent, an increase of 4.5 percentage points from the four-year graduation rate of 80.6 percent in fall 2009. The following table gives the completion rate percentages for the various subpopulations in the State of Texas for the graduating classes of 2010 and 2011.

Table 2.3

Grade 9 Longitudinal Continuation Rate (%), by Race/Ethnicity and Economics Status, Texas Public Schools, Class of 2010 and Class of 2011

Group	Continued Class of 2010	Continued Class of 2011
African American	8.4%	7.4%
American Indian	9.1%	5.2%
Asian	3.5%	3.5%
Hispanic	10.3%	8.4%
White	3.5%	92%
Economically disadvantaged	9.2%	7.6%
State	7.2%	6.2%

Note. Parts may not add to 100 percent because of rounding. Racial groups (African American, American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, and White) do not include students of Hispanic ethnicity. (TEA, 2012) Again, the gap between the achievements of the different subpopulations is very striking.

Hispanic Subpopulation

The Hispanic subpopulation is one of the fastest growing groups in the American education system. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report "The Condition of Education" (2012), the Hispanic enrollment has grown from 5.1 to 12.1 million students from the years 1990-2010. This massive influx of students has led many districts struggling with ways to help reach this struggling subpopulation.

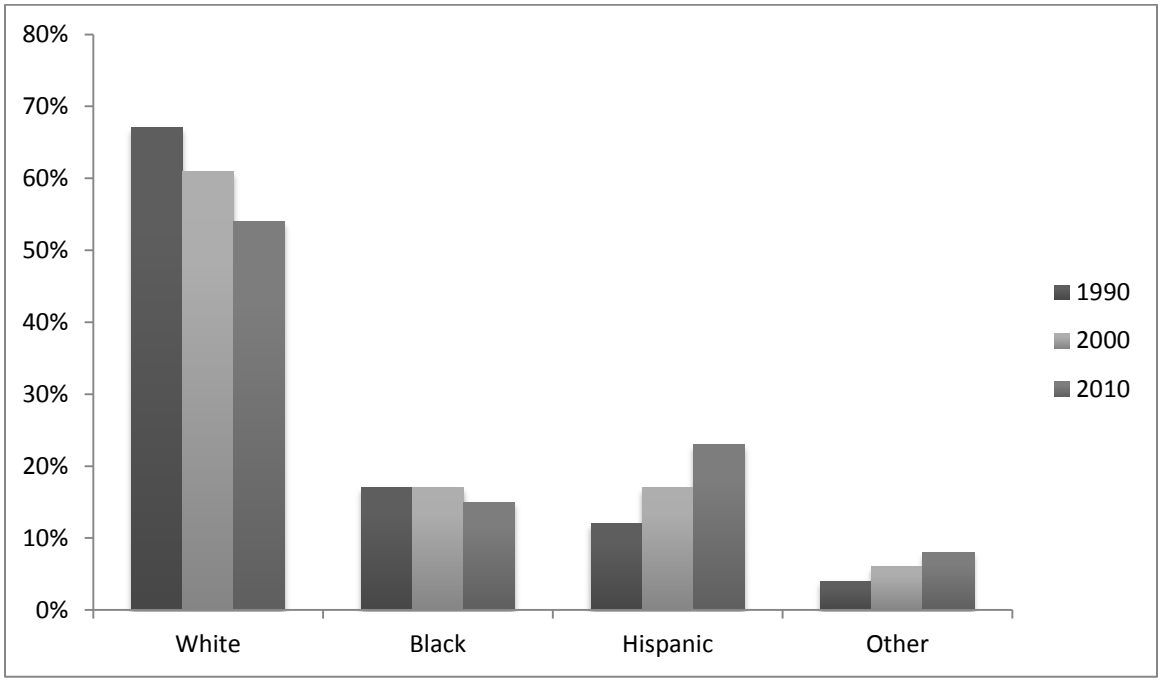

Figure 2.1. Percentage distribution of public school students by race and ethnicity for the years 1990, 2000, and 2010. This graph was adapted from figure 6.1 of the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report "The Condition of Education" (2012).

The percentage of Hispanic students is on an upward trajectory while the White and Black subpopulations are falling. This trend should be important to school leaders because of the struggles that the Hispanic subpopulation are experiencing nation-wide. In a study completed by Lys (2009), the perceptions of 8th grade Latino students about their

perceptions of high school, and graduation yielded interesting results. The study found that of the strongest predictors as to whether a Latino student perceived that they would complete high school was the following four items:

1. Gender
2. A home language other than English
3. A sibling who had dropped out of school
4. After school employment.

This provides school leaders with a framework of areas that need to be targeted to improve the transition experience with the Hispanic subpopulation. What makes the findings from this study so troubling, however, is that the indicators are all issues that are unrelated to the school. This points to the importance that building relationships between faculty and student will have on this subpopulations success. The economic impact of not graduating is especially severe for the Hispanic subpopulation. Rivera (2009) noted that:

> [A]t age 20, the expected lifetime earnings for a Hispanic male dropout will be $598,000, versus $825,000 for a high school graduate. The equivalent earnings for a Hispanic female dropout would total $343,000, compared to $454,000 for a graduate.

The economic effects of not graduating high school coupled with the increasing number of Hispanics entering the school systems every year makes the high number of Hispanic students not graduating seem even more insurmountable. However, Rivera (2009) did note that there are several programs that seem to be having a strong impact on the improvement of Hispanic graduation rates. These programs offer support to

struggling Hispanic students by offering mentors, peer advisors, tutoring, college preparation, and extracurricular activities. These programs typically meet weekly, and provide the support that students are used to receiving while in Junior High. Most of these programs are long term, and follow the students through their entire high school career.

Economically Disadvantaged Subpopulation

The economically disadvantaged subpopulation is a group that sometimes gets overlooked in research dealing with high school graduation. There is research on statistics of percentages of economically disadvantaged students graduation statuses (Aud et. al., 2012), but research as why to these students are struggling, and more importantly, ways to improve this situation is lacking. One reason for the lack of research is that all states do not disaggregate their data by economically disadvantaged status (Orfield et. al., 2004). According to (Beyond High School, 2011):

> [I]n 2007/08 the average rate of graduation with a diploma for grade 12 students in high-poverty secondary schools was 68 percent, an 18 percentage-point drop from 1999/2000. By contrast, 86 percent of grade 12 White students in low-poverty secondary schools graduated with a diploma in 2007/08, unchanged from the rate in 1999/2000.

These disparities present serious issues that all school leaders must face in order to improve their accountability and student persistence to graduation. In a study completed by Orfield et al. (2004) the percentage of students who graduated from a district of high poverty was 19% lower than students who graduated from a district of

low poverty.

Ninth Grade Intervention

> "Elementary school is very similar to middle school; high school is very similar to the first year in college; but the last year in middle school is nothing like the first year in high school" (Hertzog, 2006, p. 60).

This glaring assertion makes the need for ninth grade intervention by educational leaders completely necessary. In the book Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading School Reform (2004) the National Association of Secondary School Principals stated the following seven ways in which schools could fundamentally change the way schools operated in an effort to improve student achievement and student engagement.

- Establish the essential learnings a student is required to master in order to graduate, and adjust the curriculum and teaching strategies to realize that goal.
- Increase the quantity and improve the quality of interactions between students, teachers, and other school personnel by reducing the number of students for which any adult or group of adults is responsible.
- Implement a comprehensive advisory program that ensures that each student has frequent and meaningful opportunities to plan and assess his or her academic and social progress with a faculty member.
- Ensure that teachers use a variety of instructional strategies and assessments to accommodate individual learning styles.

- Implement schedules flexible enough to accommodate teaching strategies consistent with the ways students learn most effectively and that allow for effective teacher teaming and lesson planning.
- Institute structural leadership changes that allow for meaningful involvement in decision making by students, teachers, family members, and the community and that support effective communication with these groups.
- Align the school-wide comprehensive, ongoing professional development program and the individual Personal Learning Plans of staff members with the content knowledge and instructional strategies required to prepare students for graduation (p. 6).

Another way to improve the freshman experience is by analyzing data to help ensure that all students' needs are being met. A study completed by Catherine Gewertz, (2009) analyzed the impact that data was having on the freshman in Chicago Public School system. In an effort to combat the perils faced by ninth graders, the Chicago districts were arming administrators and teachers with pertinent data from the student's 8th grade year before they even set foot in the high school for the first time. This data can help prepare teachers for what is to come. "Having that information before school even gets started was a great way to think about my kid's strengths and weaknesses, and how I could individualize instruction" (Gewertz, 2009, p.29) Another option for intervention is to implement some type of system that will accelerate the learning capabilities of ninth graders. One of these systems is known as Talent Development High Schools. These high

schools focus on improving a ninth grader's abilities in reading and mathematics (Balfanz et.al., 2004). This program has the following four components:

1. Ninth graders receive a double dose of math and English instruction in the context of a 4x4 block schedule. This means they take math and English 90 minutes a day for the whole year.
2. During the first semester, students take three research-based courses designed to enable them to overcome poor preparation and succeed in standards based high school courses. These courses are Strategic Reading, Transition to Advanced Mathematics, and Freshman Seminar. During the second semester, students take Algebra 1, English 1, and U.S. history along with either science or an elective.
3. Teachers receive intensive and sustained professional development and implementation support. This includes 25 to 30 hours of course-specific professional development and weekly non-evaluatory, in-classroom curriculum coaching from school district teachers on special assignment and JHU instructional facilitators.
4. This instruction takes place in a Ninth Grade Success Academy. Ninth graders are located in a separate part of the school building with their own academy principal. Students are then taught by a team of teachers who have a common planning period to coordinate student outreach and recovery efforts (Balfanz et. al., 2004).

A study completed by Balfanz et al. (2004) used a regression analysis to see how the implementation of TDHS compared to comparable schools that were using no intervention program. Balfanz et al. found that all of the schools that implemented TDHS were outperforming every control group school. Some researchers believe that the interventions should come even sooner. In a study done by Smith, (1997) when a sample of public school students had a transition program in middle school they outperformed students who had no transition program at all.

Freshman Academies

One method of intervention being adopted across the country is the development of Freshman academies. These academies seek to help entering ninth graders by effectively taking the ninth grade out of high school. These centers become their own schools, and are run separately from the high school that they will feed in to. This serves the purpose of targeting ninth graders, and giving them the support they need in order to be successful in high school. Clark and Hunley (2007) explain that "the goals of a typical academy are to provide structure, to provide a sense of belonging, and to ease the transition into high school while integrating content and increasing communication between teachers and parents. The concept of the stand along freshman academy has been implemented nationwide and reports indicate varying levels of success. (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). In a study completed by McIntosh and White (2006) it was stated that the positives of a freshman academy include improvements in attendance, school behavior, teacher morale, and parental contact. One high school even reported a reduction in the number of failed freshmen classes, decreased instances of expulsions, and increased attendance rates. The option of a freshman academy is becoming very

popular and according to the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) the were a total of 154 standalone freshman academies in the 2005 school year (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

Ninth Grade Transition Programs

An increasingly popular mode of ninth grade intervention is the ninth grade transition program. These types of programs vary in complexity across the country. In the study Freshman Transition: Long-Term and Comprehensive (2006) Dedmond, Brown, and Lafauci completed a meta-analysis of decades of research on freshman transition, and transition programs. In this study they found the following five benefits that are associated with effective transition programs:

- Creates enthusiasm and appreciation for the educational process;
- Offers relevant themes for academic skill development;
- Helps students discover their identity and builds self-esteem;
- Supports guidance and counseling goals by helping students develop education and career plans; and
- Supports improved pass rates from 9th to 10th grade.

All of these benefits are important to building a successful culture in today's comprehensive high schools. Another important point from this research was the development of a set of indicators that educational leaders can use to ensure that the transition program that they are using is effective.

- Decreased absentee rates;
- Steady or increased GPA;

- Steady or increased participation in cocurricular activities;
- Decreased truancy;
- Fewer discipline incidents;
- Positive mental health;
- Goal-oriented students; and
- Involved parents.

There are many different types of programs for educational leaders to choose from. Some programs are simple one-day orientations that focus on school logistics (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999b). During this type of transition program educational leaders are mainly concerned with making sure that students know where to go, and even more importantly, where they can go for help. There isn't much focus on academic readiness, or study skills that will help them persist to graduation (Smith, 1997). Other options include having the student participate in a transitional class during their first semester of their ninth grade year (Mizelle, 2005). These classes serve as a type of "home room" that students can learn about opportunities that they can take advantage of at high school, and to receive any type of remediation that might make them more successful. In a study by Kemple and Herlihy (2004), it was reported that schools that implemented a freshman seminar style class had the following results:

1. Fewer reported fights;
2. Fewer reported disciplinary episodes;
3. Higher rates of attendance;
4. Acquisition of better study habits and time management skills;

5. Are better able to handle work in 10th grade and beyond;
6. Have acquired or improved their technology skills; and
7. Work more seriously and with more self-understanding toward graduation and career.

Another option for school districts is to adopt more comprehensive programs that may even follow the student through all four years of high school. Some of these programs utilize one day to one week orientations, but also have components that follow the student throughout their first year and beyond. One example of this type of transition program is known as Link Crew. Link crew is developed to be a comprehensive transition program that "links" entering freshman with upper classmen in mentor type of role. These mentors help the entering freshman with any difficulties they may be having transitioning into the high school experience. These mentors received training during the summer, and work with the teachers of the campuses to provide as much support as possible to entering freshman (Jacobson, 2012). Pre and Posttest studies examining the implementation of Link Crew have found that a majority of reporting schools experienced a drop in failure rates and disciplinary infractions, and an improvement in the academic success of ninth graders (Jacobson, 2012).

Ninth Grade Initiative

The ninth grade initiative in TEXASISD was developed before the start of the 2004-2005 school year. It was implemented by Griffin High School in an effort to improve the transition experience of entering ninth graders. There are many different aspects to the ninth grade initiative in Griffin High School.

The first aspect is a weeklong summer bridge program known as fish camp. This camp gives the educational leaders of Griffin High school the chance to meet all the new freshman, and provide them an avenue in which to handle all logistical aspects for the beginning of the year. Students are taken on tours of the facility, and are given their schedules for the first time. They are also taken to have their student ids made, and an effort is made to inform the new freshman about the expectations of the campus. Students are encouraged to ask questions, and are directed to who in the building can help solve their problems. It is also a time for group building activities that give the students a chance to meet their new classmates.

The next major aspect of the ninth grade initiative is the development of SLC grouping. The entire freshman class is broken down into smaller groups to help facilitate relationships between the students and their teachers. Each group has the same set of core teachers and classes that they will meet with all year long. The point of these "pure" teams is that teachers will become very familiar with the students that their other team teachers also have. These teachers are given one extra conference period to be used as a time to discuss individual student strengths and weaknesses, and work collaboratively to develop best practices for their classrooms. In these pure, collaborative teams student learning becomes enhanced which prepares students to move forward toward graduation. Resources, structures, and processes all become relevant to the current needs of students. Students then become motivated as a result of genuine student recognition.

Another aspect of the Ninth Grade Initiative is the development of a framework to be utilized when a student isn't being successful. This framework is known as the Pyramid of Intervention for Learning. The Pyramid of Intervention for Learning gives all

staff members the same list of options for interventions that may need to take place to help a student become successful. The interventions become increasingly more complex the higher you move up the pyramid. The higher a child moves up the pyramid the more members of the staff they will come into contact with. This allows for more in depth intervention to take place after continued struggles by the student.

The final aspect of the ninth grade initiative at Griffin High School is push for all students to be involved with at least one extracurricular activity. This aspect was added because studies have shown that student involvement in extracurricular activities have a positive effect on student achievement (Silliker, S., & Quirk, J., 1997). Students are presented with the many extracurricular options available to them during fish camp. If none of these options are intriguing, the students are allowed to develop their own organizations under the condition that the organization must be first approved. In order to be approved, the students must obtain a faculty advisor, and fill out the appropriate paperwork as provided by the school. This is a great way for the students to become actively involved in their school, and help integrate themselves into the student body. There are also procedures in place to identify uninvolved students to encourage participation. The point of all of these aspects is to in essence make the high school smaller, and therefore, easier to navigate for the entering freshman.

When the ninth grade initiative was being developed there was much discussion over what the focus of the program should be. Since there is a plethora of literature that links success in the ninth grade to long-term success, (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Dedmond & LaFauci, 2006), the main focus of the program became the improvement of percentages of ninth graders who pass all core subject areas. The educational leaders of

Griffin High School believed that if they could show an improvement in this one area that the rest of their problems would just follow suit.

The ninth grade initiative at Griffin High School has reported a steady trend in improvement in the percentage of ninth graders who pass all core subject areas. This improvement has become a sense of pride in the Griffin High School community. However, this improvement no matter how impressive still doesn't answer the question of whether or not these students are being made ready to be successful throughout their entire high school career. Simply devising a strategy to help student pass their classes in the ninth grade does not necessarily mean that a student has been through a transition. The hope of this study is to ensure that the ninth grade initiative is indeed providing a transition program that is transitioning students for success.

Summary

The transition to high school is a very important point on every adolescent's journey to adulthood. The purpose of this literature review was to examine how dangerous this transition can be to the overall success of adolescents in high school. This literature review examined the pitfalls of the ninth grade year and the ways in which a ninth grade intervention program can help address these problems. The difference between graduating, continuing, and dropout were identified, and statistics of each were shared. There was also mention of differing types of ninth grade intervention, and of the specific aspects of the ninth grade initiative at Griffin High School. This literature review showed that with all of the problems currently facing ninth graders that an intervention program was necessary to help get graduation rates back on track. Early detection is the

key, and continued support will help improve the transition for the entire ninth grade population. Chapter three defines the methodology that was used for the study. Chapter four contains the results of the study, and chapter five contains the analysis of the findings.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Overview

The highest level of student retention at any level is during the ninth grade. In an effort to improve student success at the ninth grade level TEXASISD set out to develop a model that will improve the transition between eighth and ninth grade for all of its students. TEXASISD developed a committee and held community meetings to help research out what elements should be added to the new initiative. The original goal of the initiative was to improve the number of students who successfully pass all core subjects while in the ninth grade. The ultimate outcome of the research and planning was the TEXASISD Ninth Grade Initiative.

In the fall of 2005 the Ninth Grade Initiative was rolled out at all the high schools in TEXASISD. It contained within it many data based strategies to improve the transition between the eighth and ninth grades. Included in the plan was the development of a SLC framework at the ninth grade level, and a response to intervention plan in place to help any underperforming students. The original intent of the program was to increase the number of freshman students who passed all four, core subject areas. Ultimately, the Ninth Grade Initiative has been successful in its original purpose. The percentage of ninth graders who pass all four, core subjects in the ninth grade has been increasing since the beginning of the implementation of the ninth grade initiative. The problem with the original intent of the Ninth Grade Initiative is that it is too short sighted. Does the Ninth Grade Initiative actually successfully transition students into high school, or is it simply a

program to help students pass the ninth grade? This is a very important distinction. If the Ninth Grade Initiative is only helping students pass the ninth grade, what will happen to those students as they continue on throughout their high school journey when those supports are taken away? This research study was conducted to see if TEXASISD's Ninth Grade Initiative has a significant relationship to persistence to graduation, and long-term student success.

Purpose of the Study

The major focus of this study was to examine if the implementation of a freshman year transition program would have a significant relationship with long-term student success as measured by drop-out rate, four-year graduation rate, and continuation rate. The hope of this study would be that the ninth grade transition program would decrease the dropout rate, increase the four-year graduation rate, and improve the cohort continuation rate thereby increasing persistence to graduation. Another focus of this study was to examine if there is any statistically significant relationship between students who participate in this program and the persistence to graduation of the Hispanic and economically disadvantaged subpopulations for the school of study. These two subpopulations are on the rise in the school of study, and across the nation. The success of these two subpopulations is sometimes the difference between if a school is labeled as acceptable or in need of intervention. The results of this study can help all stakeholders examine the effects a successful transition program can have on student's persistence to graduation.

Research Questions

This study was developed to analyze the relationship that Griffin High School's ninth grade initiative program would have on persistence to high school graduation. The following are the research questions that will be addressed and answered as a part of this study.

1. Does a significant relationship exist between the implementation and participation in TEXASISD's comprehensive ninth grade transition program at Griffin High School and persistence to high school graduation?
2. Does a significant relationship exist between the implementation and participation in TEXASISD's comprehensive ninth grade transition program at Griffin High School's Hispanic subpopulation and persistence toward high school graduation?
3. Does a significant relationship exist between the implementation and participation in TEXASISD's comprehensive ninth grade transition program at Griffin High School's economically disadvantaged subpopulation and persistence toward high school graduation?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses and null hypotheses were formulated to determine the effect that a freshman transition program had on long-term student success:

Hypothesis #1. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade transition program will show a significant relationship in the persistence to high school graduation of Griffin High School.

Null hypothesis #1.1. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade transition program will show no significant change in the persistence to high school graduation of Griffin High School.

Hypothesis #2. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade transition program will show a significant change in persistence to high school graduation for the Hispanic subpopulation of Griffin High School.

Null hypothesis# 2.1. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade initiative program will show no significant change in the persistence to high school graduation for the Hispanic subpopulation of Griffin High School.

Hypothesis #3. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade initiative program will show a significant change in the persistence to high school graduation for the economically disadvantaged subpopulation of Griffin High School.

Null hypothesis #3.1. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade initiative program will show no significant change in the persistence to high school graduation for the economically disadvantaged subpopulation of Griffin High School.

Description of the Research Design

The research design for this study can be categorized as a categorical study on the effects of a ninth grade transition program on long-term student success as defined as persistence to graduation. This researcher will review cohort data on the trends of the

dropout rate, four year graduation rate, and continuer rate for Griffin High School. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) stated: "Categorical data simply indicate the total number of objects, individuals, or events a researcher finds in a particular category" (p. 186).

This categorical research project will be causal-comparative in nature. The data that will be utilized in this study has already been complied, and no changes can be made to the population or independent variable. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) also stated: "In causal-comparative research, investigators attempt to determine the cause or consequences of differences that already exist between or among groups of individuals" (p. 363).

The independent variable in this study was the implementation of and participation in a ninth grade transition program. The dependent variables were the ethnicity, economically disadvantaged status, and the cohort student graduation status at the end of four years of high school. The treatment group consisted of all the cohorts of first time 9th graders at the Griffin High School who participated in the Ninth Grade Initiative. The control group was the cohorts of first time 9th graders at Griffin High School before the implementation of the independent variable.

Setting

The setting of TEXASISD is a suburban, comprehensive, K-12 school district. TEXASISD is located in East Texas, and near a major metropolitan area. Griffin High School has received the Academically Acceptable rating from TEA during every year of the study, with the exception of the 2009-2010 school year for which they received Recognized.

Table 3.1

TEA Ratings for Griffin High School

		School Year	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011
Griffin High School	TEA Rating	AA	AA	AA	AA	AA	AA	AA	RECOGNIZED	AA

Note. Data was obtained from the state AEIS reports released from TEA, 2012. This table serves as snapshot of the success of Griffin High School according to TEA. Griffin High school has continuously been rated as simple Academically Acceptable.

Griffin High School has enough students to be considered a 5A school by UIL standards, and belongs to a medium-sized district that has multiple high schools. Griffin High School is the largest school in the district and has the largest population of students. The demographics of Griffin High School show growing numbers of Hispanic students, and a decline in the number of White students throughout the years of study. The number of economically disadvantaged students is also on the rise throughout the years of study. "The success of a causal-comparative study depends in a large degree on how carefully the comparison groups are defined" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 366).

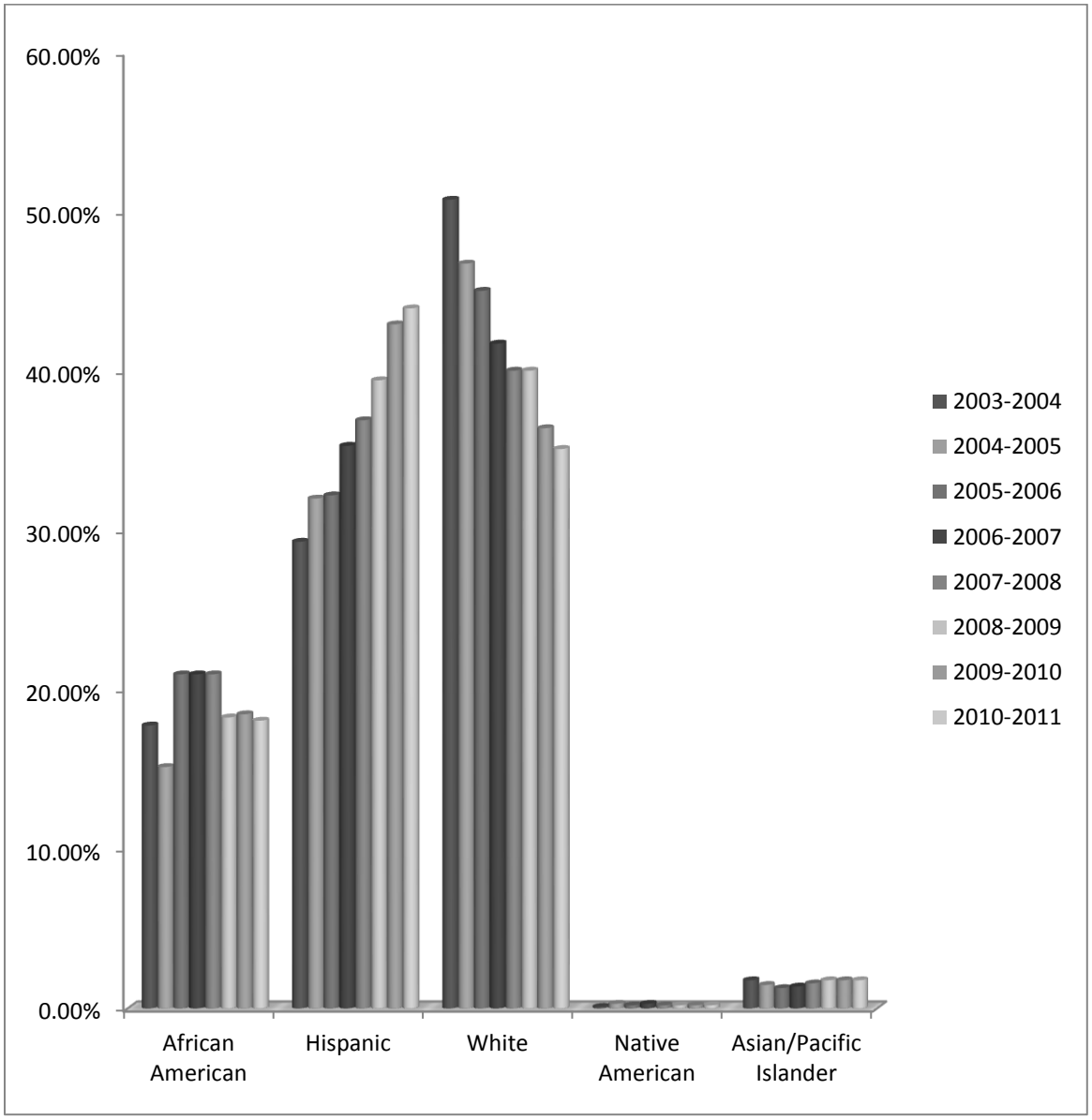

Figure 3.1. *Demographics for Griffin High School during years of study.* This figure illustrates that while most student groups are holding steady at Griffin High School, there is a definite trend of growth for the Hispanic subpopulation and decline in the White subpopulation.

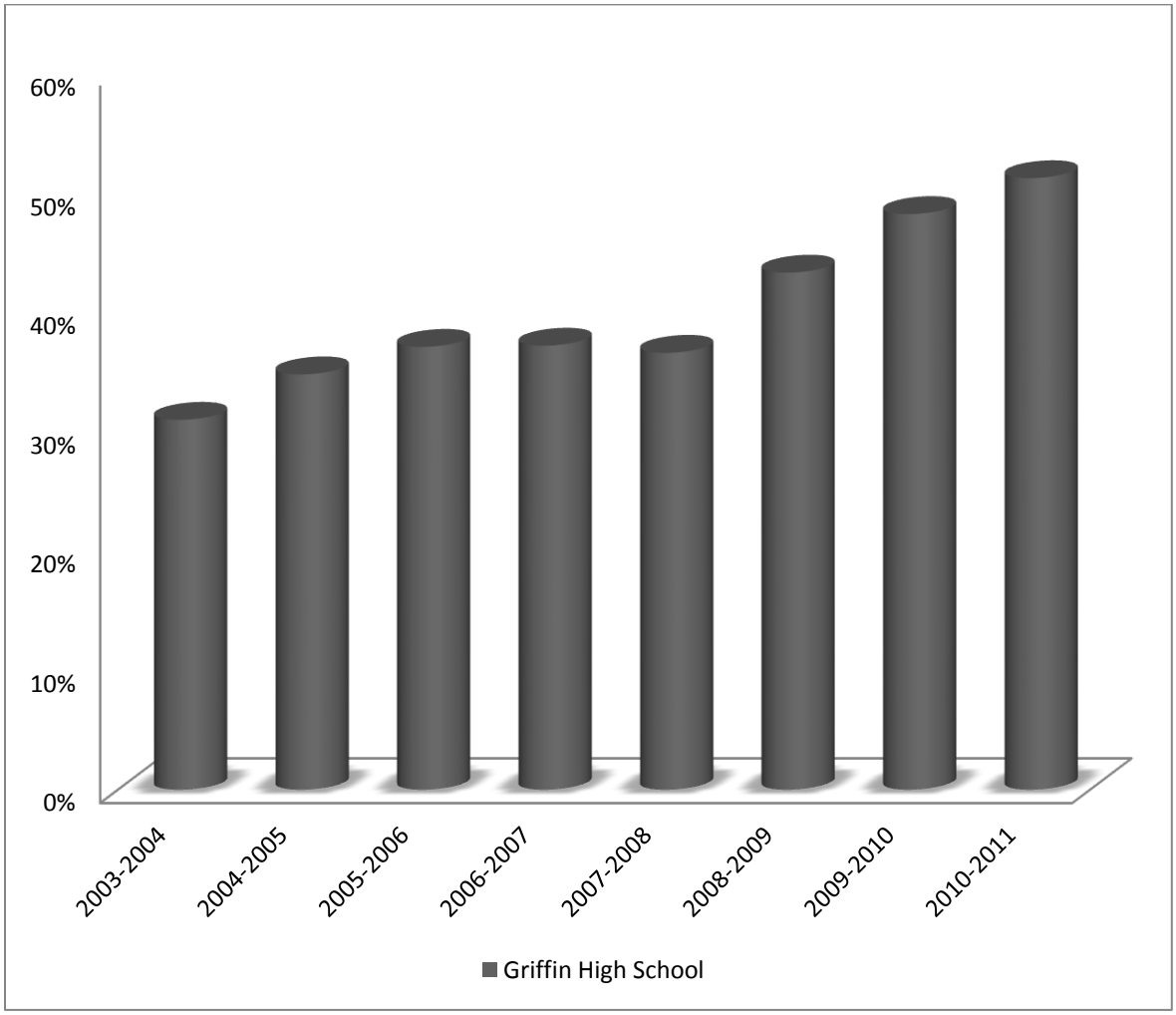

Figure 3.2. Percentage of students economically disadvantaged at Griffin High School. This graph illustrates growing trend of economically disadvantaged students who are entering Griffin High School. This is a growing trend in school districts across the nation.

Subjects

Since this study is looking at graduating classes as a whole, there is no need to produce any type of representative sample. The groups will be placed into cohorts based

on their status as first time ninth graders for each year of study. While the data will be examined from the years 2003-2011, the study will focus on the graduating classes from the years 2007-2011. The freshman transition program was implemented in the year 2005-2006. The cohorts will be made of up all students in a graduating class at the end of their completion of four years of high school. The only exception is for students who did not complete all four years at Griffin High School. Any student who transferred in after the first day of school of their ninth grade was excluded from the study since they did not participate in the full independent variable of the ninth grade initiative program. Also any students who may have possibly completed their entire year of ninth grade, and then transferred out, and then back in were also excluded.

Procedures

This study was developed in an effort to analyze the significance of a relationship, if any, which may exist between participation in a comprehensive freshman transition program and student persistence to graduation. A causal-comparative research design was utilized because two groups that differ on one variable are being compared by a different variable. The variable that is different for these two groups is their inclusion in a freshman transition program. The variables for which they will be compared were their persistence to graduation, their ethnicity, and their inclusion into the economically disadvantaged subpopulation.

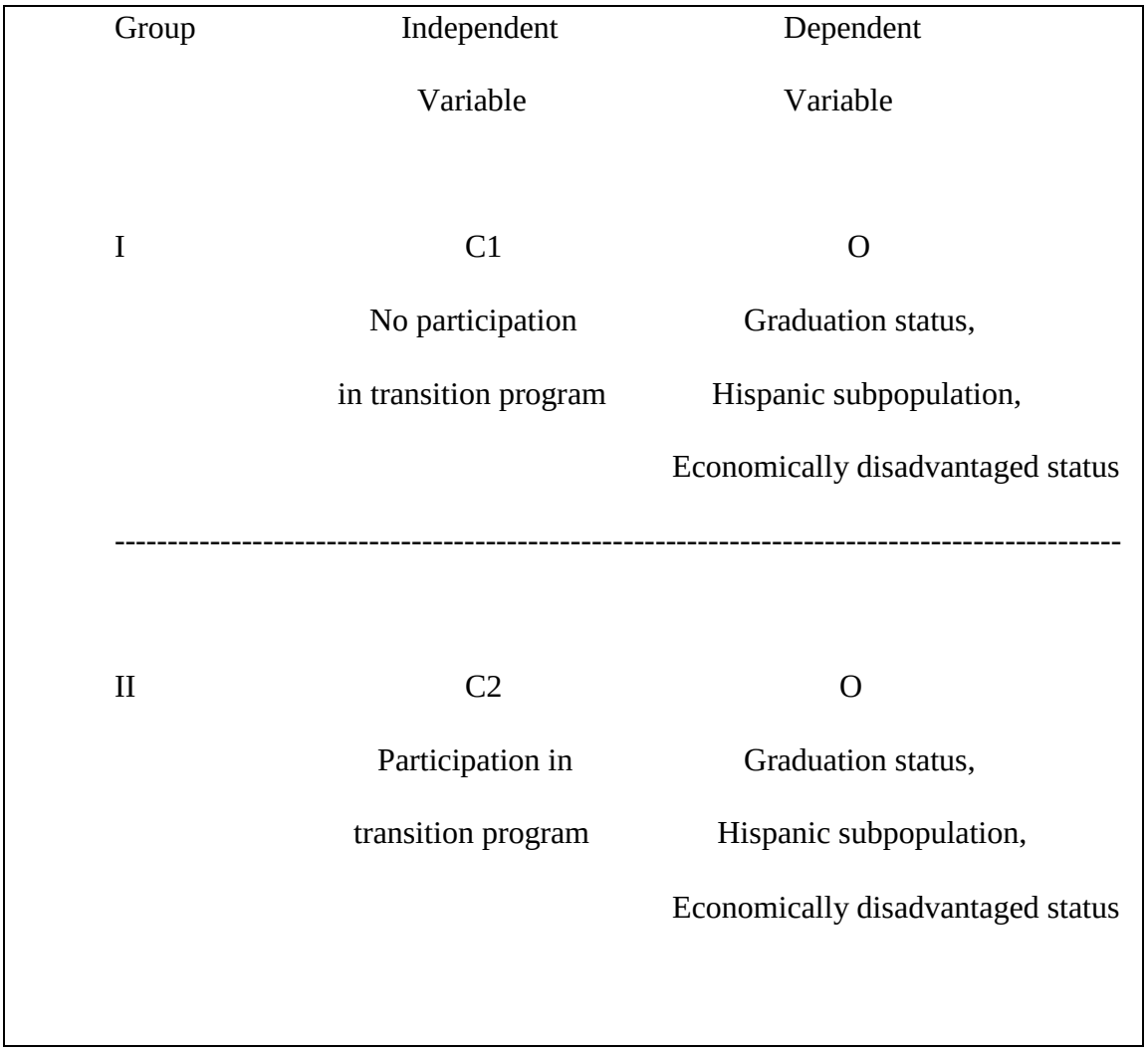

Figure 3.3. Causal-comparative design. This illustration was drawn from *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education* (p. 367), by J. R. Fraenkel, and N.E. Wallen (2009). St. Louis, MO: McGraw-Hill Companies

The first step in the process was to contact the Director of Research and Accountability for TEXASISD and inform him of the intent, purpose, and significance of the study to be conducted and to request permission to collect the necessary data from the district student information system. Archival, categorical data was taken from the district

student information system for the years of study, by cohort graduating class. Any student who did not me the requirements of the study was taken out of the data set. These cohort groups were assigned a "leaver code" to determine their persistence to graduation. These leaver codes were based on whether that student graduated within their four years at the school, dropped out, or are continuing their education at Griffin High School for another year. While the primary focus of this study was to examine the relationship between participation in a transition program and persistence to high school graduation, the trends of the school of study could not be ignored. It is for this reason that special emphasis is being placed on the ethnicity and socioeconomic status subpopulations of the study.

Each student within a cohort group also received a code that signifies their ethnicity, and code that signifies their status as to whether or not they are economically disadvantaged. These cohort groups were then staggered on top of each other in a table beginning with the two pre-transition program cohorts. The post-transition cohorts follow, and separate column were created to identify all student's graduation status at the end of four years, ethnicity, and economically disadvantaged codes.

Instruments

To enhance the reliability and usefulness of this study descriptive research and inferential statistics were used to analyze the changes of all variables in the study. Most educational research is conducted to see how well or how poorly schools are performing. One aspect of this research is to analyze the impact that new programs have on school performance. One problem that researchers run in to is solely relying on inferential statistical analysis to analyze effectiveness. While inferential statistical analysis is useful

in the field of educational research, the findings may or may not have any real educational significance. To make sure that this study has educational significance as well as statistical significance time was devoted to analyze the current growth trends of graduation status for the entire school and all of the subpopulations of Griffin High School. An examination of these trends will add weight to any positive statistical findings, and can add validation to the program for any negative statistical findings.

The descriptive part of the study included an analysis of all the variables converted into a percent to examine the growth, if any, in the students of Griffin High School's persistence to graduation. The inferential statistical analysis for this study was the Chi-square test. The Chi-square test is "used to analyze data that are reported in categories." (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 232). The use of a Chi-square test was chosen for this study because every variable in the study was a category. The independent variable was broken down in to the categories of participating in the treatment or not participating in the treatment. The dependent variable of graduation status was broken down in to the categories of graduating in four years, continuing on for a fifth year, or dropping out. The dependent variable of ethnicity was broken down in to the categories of Hispanic, White, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and Multiracial. The dependent variable of socioeconomic status was broken down in to the categories of economically disadvantaged and not economically disadvantaged. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) state:

> The chi-square test is based on a comparison between expected frequencies and actual, obtained frequencies. If the obtained frequencies are similar to the expected frequencies, then researchers conclude that the

> groups do not differ. If there are considerable differences between the expected and obtained frequencies, on the other hand, then researchers conclude that there is a significant difference in attitude between the two groups. (p. 234).

In addition, Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) stated, "It is customary in educational research to view as unlikely any outcome that has a probability of .05 (p=.05) or less. This is referred to as the .05 level of significance" (p. 224). This study utilized the .05 level of significance to determine the statistical significance for this study. The Chi-square was administered to determine if any statistical significance can be found between the implementation and participation in the Ninth Grade Initiative and an increase in persistence to graduation in Griffin High School.

Limitations for this Study

"When a study has internal validity, it means that any relationship observed between two or more variables should be unambiguous as to what it means rather than being due to something else" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 166). This study used Fraenkel and Wallen's twelve possible threats to internal validity for its framework of limitations.

Subject characteristics: The subject characteristics were a threat to internal validity. The various differences of the population such gender, ethnicity, and level of intelligence could not be controlled.

The major threat to the internal validity of a causal-comparative study is the possibility of a subject characteristic threat. Because the researcher had no say in either the selection or formation of the comparison groups, there is always the likelihood that

the groups are not equivalent on one or more important variables other than the identified group membership variable. (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 367)

Location: There were no threats to location in this study.

History: A historical threat to the study happened in the fall of 2008 when a third high school in TEXASISD opened its doors. This divided the student population in TEXASISD, and could affect areas of instruction and school culture.

Mortality: The loss of subjects in the study was not a threat to internal validity. "In studies comparing groups, loss of subjects probably will not be a problem if the loss is about the same in all groups" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 168). There were not any significant changes in the number of subjects in the study.

Instrumentation: This was not a threat to the internal validity of this study.

Data collector characteristics: This was not a threat to internal validity because all data was archival, and collected from a database.

Data collector bias: This was not a threat to internal validity because all data was archival, and collected from a database.

Testing: This was not a threat to internal validity, because a test was not administered.

Maturation: Maturation is not a threat to internal validity because the students were placed into cohort graduating classes that spent all four years at the same high school.

Attitude of subject: This was a threat to the internal validity of the study. Student attitude is an important factor of whether or not a student will drop out of school, and has an impact on a student's desire to finish school on time.

Implementation: This was a threat to internal validity because there was no way to control how the teachers at the school of study implemented the program.

Regression: This was not considered a threat to internal validity because the previous measures were from a different group of students.

Summary

This study analyzed the impact that a freshman transition program has on long-term student success as defined by persistence to graduation. In order to achieve this goal, the cohort dropout, four-year graduation, and continuer rate were analyzed to see if the post implementation cohorts showed statistically significant growth. Due to the current growth trends of the school of study, the ethnicity and socioeconomic status of these cohort groups were also analyzed to examine how they were affected by the treatment of the independent variable. All information for this study was obtained using the district student information system from the years of study. The Ninth Grade Initiative was implemented during the 2005-2006 school year at Griffin High School. This analysis serves every stakeholder who is considering implementing a ninth grade transition program at their school, to be certain that they will be creating the most effective and efficient program possible. The research on the importance of the transition between middle and high school supports the idea that the ninth grade year is pivotal in the overall high school success of students. The success of these transition programs on student success, however, can only truly be labeled as successful if the end result is more than simply that the students are only passing the ninth grade.

Chapter Four

Results

The primary purpose of this study was to determine whether a statistically significant relationship existed between implementation and participation in TEXASISD's Ninth Grade Initiative program and improved persistence to graduation. The reviewed data was from the classes that graduated between the years of 2007-2011. The TEXASISD Ninth Grade Initiative program was implemented in the 2005-2006 school year. This means that the graduating classes of 2007, and 2008 did not participated in the TEXASISD Ninth Grade Initiative and were considered the control group for this study. The graduating classes of 2009-2011 participated in the Ninth Grade Initiative and were considered to be the experimental group for this study. Contained in this chapter are the findings of the descriptive research and the statistical analysis of the null hypotheses.

Research Questions

This study was developed to analyze the relationship that Griffin High School's ninth grade initiative program would have on persistence to high school graduation. The following are the research questions that will be addressed and answered as a part of this study.

1. Does a significant relationship exist between the implementation and participation in TEXASISD's comprehensive ninth grade transition program at Griffin High School and persistence to high school graduation?

2. Does a significant relationship exist between the implementation and participation in TEXASISD's comprehensive ninth grade transition program at Griffin High School's Hispanic subpopulation and persistence toward high school graduation?
3. Does a significant relationship exist between the implementation and participation in TEXASISD's comprehensive ninth grade transition program at Griffin High School's economically disadvantaged subpopulation and persistence toward high school graduation?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses and null hypotheses were formulated to determine the effect that a freshman transition program had on long-term student success:

Hypothesis #1. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade transition program will show a significant relationship in the persistence to high school graduation of Griffin High School.

Null hypothesis #1.1. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade transition program will show no significant change in the persistence to high school graduation of Griffin High School.

Hypothesis #2. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade transition program will show a significant change in persistence to high school graduation for the Hispanic subpopulation of Griffin High School.

Null hypothesis# 2.1. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade initiative program will show no significant change in the

persistence to high school graduation for the Hispanic subpopulation of Griffin High School.

Hypothesis #3. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade initiative program will show a significant change in the persistence to high school graduation for the economically disadvantaged subpopulation of Griffin High School.

Null hypothesis #3.1. Implementation and participation in the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade initiative program will show no significant change in the persistence to high school graduation for the economically disadvantaged subpopulation of Griffin High School.

Descriptive Research Findings

There were a total of 1952 students who were a part of this study. The number of students who were in the pre-implementation control group numbered 903, and the number in the post-implementation treatment group numbered 1049. Of the 903 members of the control group 792 of them graduated at the end of their four years at the Griffin High School. In the treatment group this number rose to 943. The number of students in the control group that continued on for a fifth year of high school was 60, and the number of students in the treatment group who was labeled a continuer was 18. The control group contained 71 students who within their first four years of high school dropped out, and the treatment group contained 88 students who dropped out within their first four years of high school. Of the 1952 students who were a part of the program 623 of the students identified themselves as Hispanic for their ethnicity. Of the 623 self-identified Hispanics in the study 273 of them were in the pre-implementation control group, while 350 of

them were in the post-implementation treatment group. There were a total of 555 students out of the 1952 total participants who were labeled as Economically Disadvantaged. Of that 555 identified as Economically Disadvantaged, 242 of the me were in the pre-implementation control group, while 313 of them were in the post-implementation treatment group.

The following tables are the research findings for the graduating classes of 2007-2011. They contain within them the percent of student's graduation status for the entire campus, Hispanic subpopulation, and students labeled as economically disadvantaged. The tables for the class of 2007 and the class of 2008 highlight the information for pre-implementation control group, while the tables for class of 2009-2011 were in the post-implementation treatment group.

Table 4.1

Class of 2007 Graduation Status Data

	Campus	Hispanic Subpopulation	Economically Disadvantaged Subpopulation
Graduated in 4 years	78.3%	71.3%	67.6%
Continuer	8.4%	9.6%	10.6%
Dropped out	11.3%	16.5%	19.6%

Note. Percentages may not add up to 100% because the percentage of students who received a GED were left out.

Table 4.2

Class of 2008 Graduation Status Data

	Campus	Hispanic Subpopulation	Economically Disadvantaged Subpopulation
Graduated in 4 years	81.3%	75.3%	74.2%
Continuer	8.2%	5.4%	7.4%
Dropped out	9.3%	7.8%	17.1%

Note. Percentages may not add up to 100% because the percentage of students who received a GED were left out.

Upon examination of the classes of 2007 data, the percentages for graduation are very low. To only have a little over three quarters of students graduating on time is not acceptable for any campus. The Hispanic subpopulation and Economically Disadvantaged subpopulation lag even further than the total campus population. The percentage of students dropping out is fairly high for the entire campus, and becomes even more alarming when you examine the drop out percentages for the Hispanic subpopulation and Economically Disadvantaged subpopulation. In 2008 the percentages in all categories remained fairly steady with all categories receiving close to a 2-percentage point improvement.

Table 4.3

Class of 2009 Graduation Status Data

	Campus	Hispanic Subpopulation	Economically Disadvantaged Subpopulation
Graduated in 4 years	84%	79.8%	81.2%
Continuer	5.3%	6.6%	6.7%
Dropped out	9.6%	13.2%	10%

Note. Percentages may not add up to 100% because the percentage of students who received a GED were left out.

Table 4.4

Class of 2010 Graduation Status Data

	Campus	Hispanic Subpopulation	Economically Disadvantaged Subpopulation
Graduated in 4 years	91.7%	87.7%	87.2%
Continuer	1.8%	2%	3.3%
Dropped out	5.9%	9.9%	8.9%

Note. Percentages may not add up to 100% because the percentage of students who received a GED were left out.

Table 4.5

Class of 2011 Graduation Status Data

	Campus	Hispanic Subpopulation	Economically Disadvantaged Subpopulation
Graduated in 4 years	90.2%	90.7%	90.2%
Continuer	2.7%	3.1%	2.3%
Dropped out	6.5%	5.7%	6.5%

Note. Percentages may not add up to 100% because the percentage of students who received a GED were left out.

The post-implementation treatment group showed a marked improvement over the pre-implementation groups percentages in almost every category. There was a continuous trend of improvement throughout all years of the post-implementation groups graduating classes. The Hispanic subpopulation saw a rise in the dropout rate in the first year of post-implementation of the Ninth Grade Initiative. However, within one year the rate was dropping and dropped to its lowest level of 5.7% in 2011. Of special note it the drastic rise of the Economically Disadvantaged subpopulation's percentage of students who graduated in four years, and the subsequent drop of the percentage of students who dropped out within the last four years.

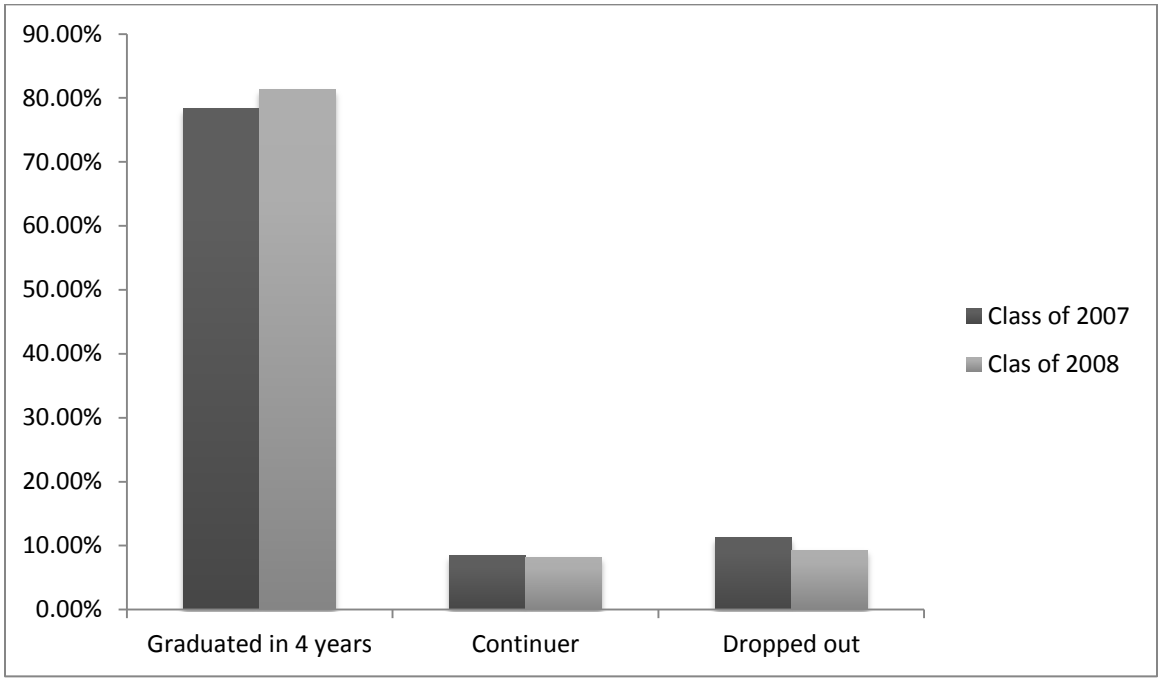

Figure 4.1. Pre-implementation group Campus graduation data.

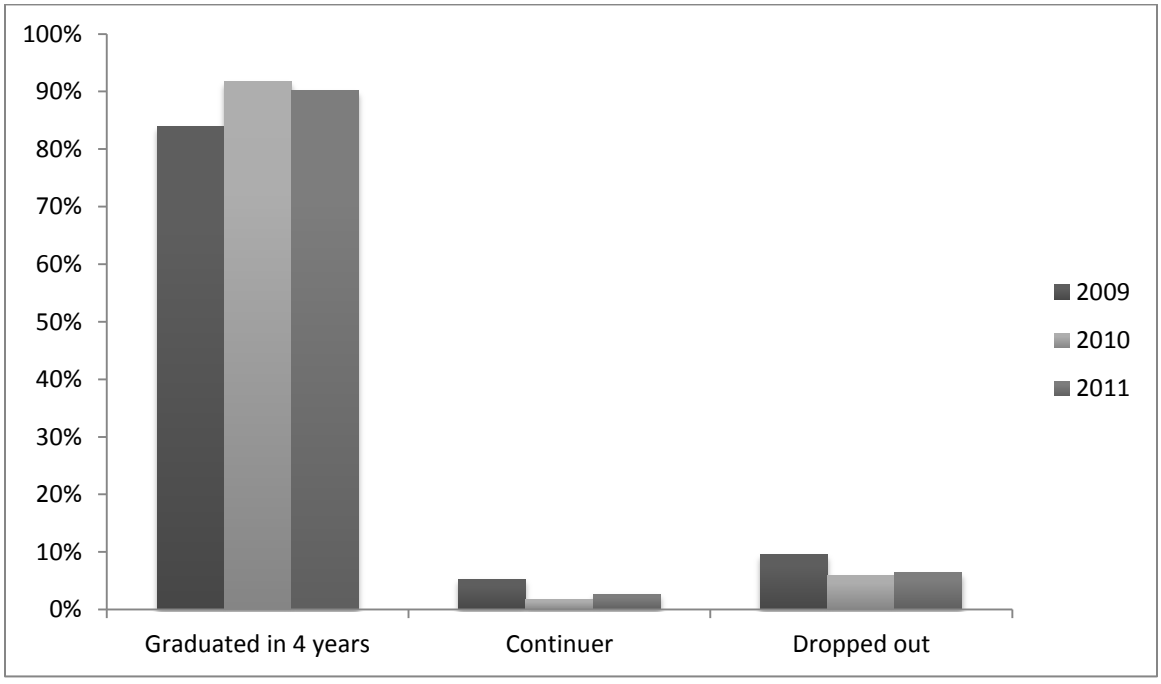

Figure 4.2. Post-implementation group campus graduation data.

A comparison of the pre-implementation control group and post-implementation treatment group shows a basic trend of growth for the students who are graduating in four years. The steady reduction in the number of students continuing on a for fifth year of high school, and dropping out within the first four years of high school is expected because to have a rise in one group you must have a reduction in the other. The trend of growth for students who are graduating in four years is an average of 3 percentage points every year since the implementation of the program. From the last year of the pre-implementation control group to the first year of the post-implementation treatment group there was a 3.1% drop in the number of students who dropped out in their first four years of high school. The dropout rate dropped a total of 4.8% from the class of 2007 school year to the class of 2011 school year.

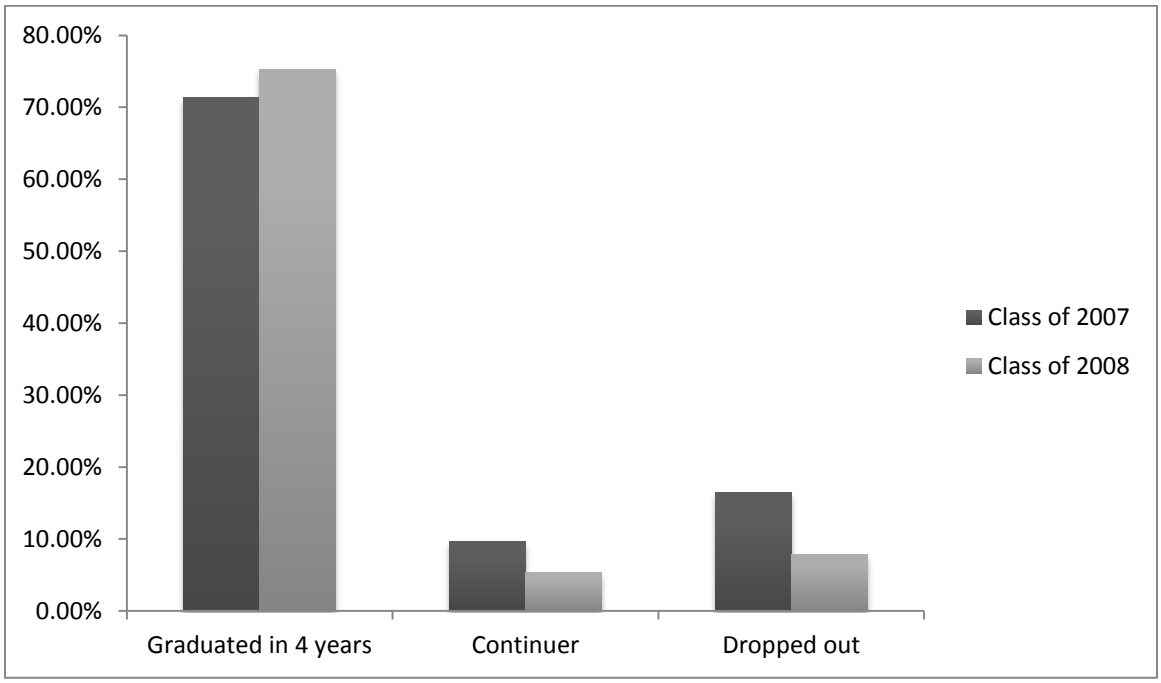

Figure 4.3. Pre-implementation group Hispanic subpopulation graduation data.

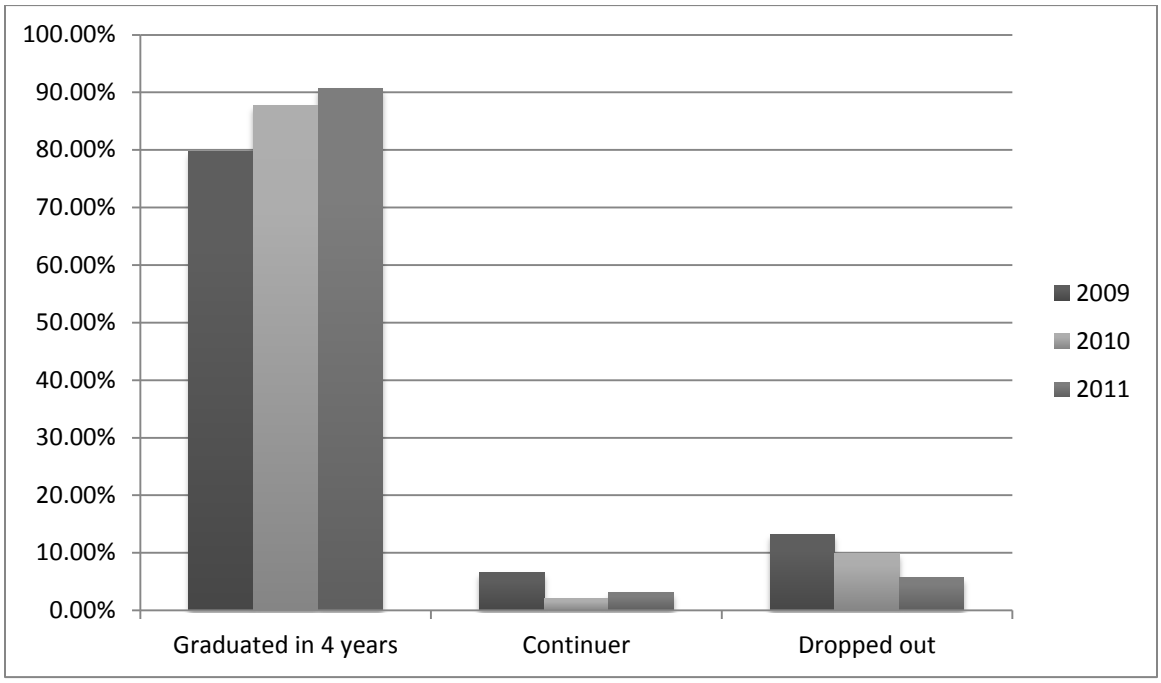

Figure 4.4. Post-implementation group Hispanic subpopulation graduation data.

The Hispanic subpopulation persistence to graduation also saw dramatic growth during the years of the study. The number of Hispanics who graduated after four years of high school grew 19.4% during the course of the study. There was never a year in the entire study that the number of students graduating on time did anything but rise. One interesting item of note was the rise in the dropout rate after the first year of implementation of the ninth grade initiative. While the general trend is still downward, to have that large of jump in the first group's numbers causes concern. Overall, the dropout rate still did contain a 10.8% reduction from the class of 2007 to the class of 2011.

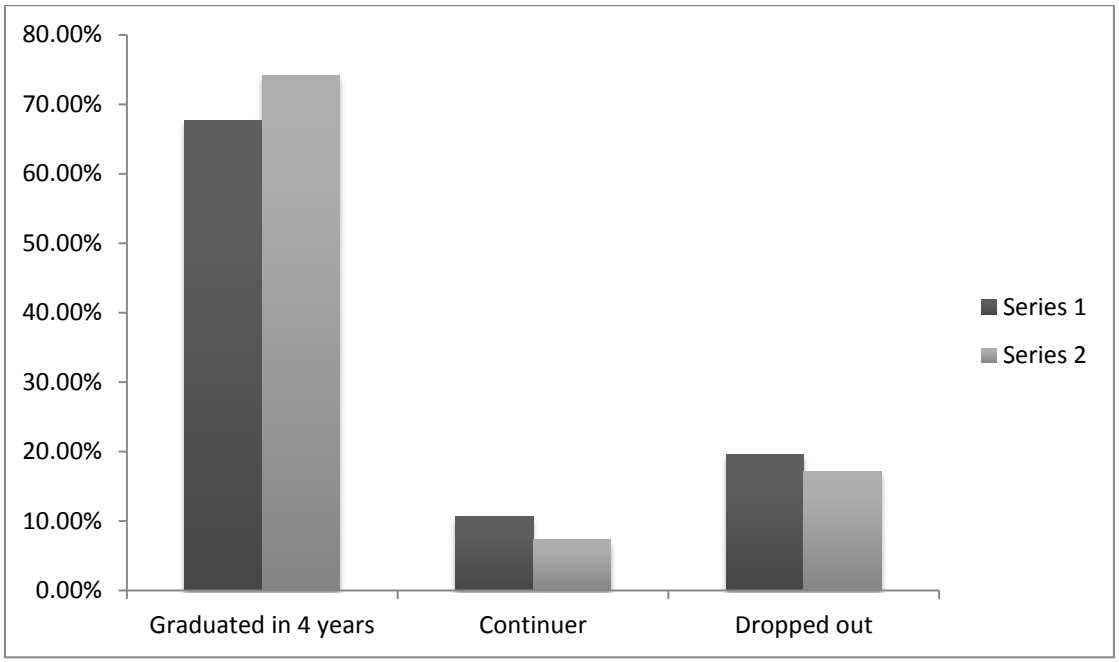

Figure 4.5. Pre-implementation group economically disadvantaged subpopulation graduation data.

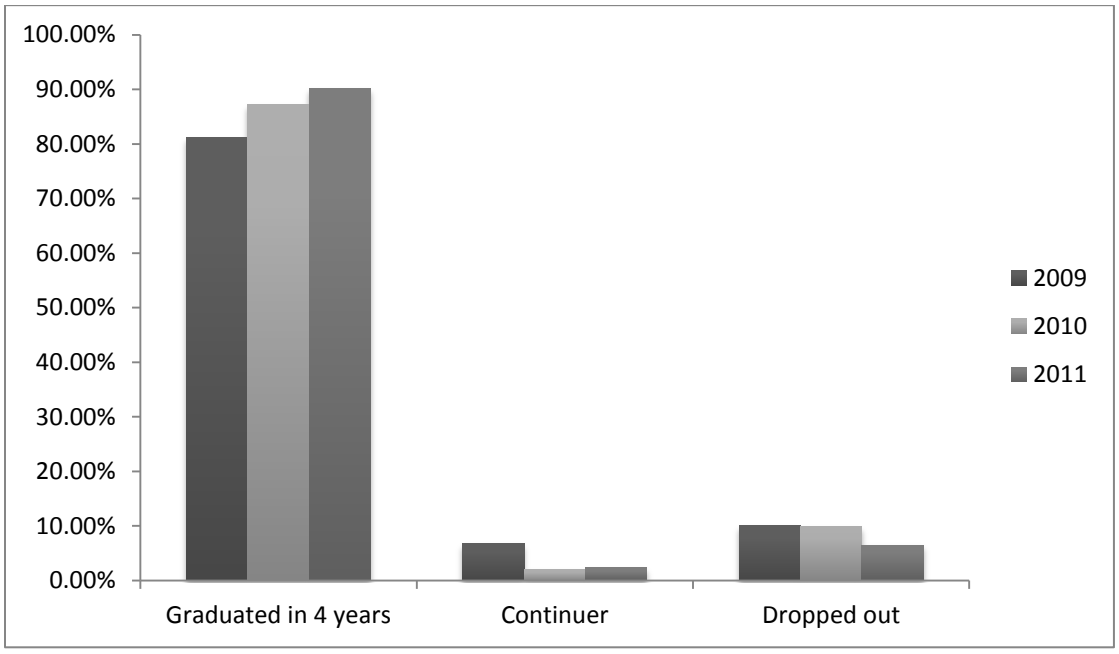

Figure 4.6. Post-implementation group economically disadvantaged subpopulation graduation data.

The Economically Disadvantaged subpopulation's general trends were consistent with the other dependent variables. The percentage of students graduating in four years in the Economically Disadvantaged subpopulations grew a total of 22.6% during the course of the study. Students graduating in 4 years grew by an average of 5.3% per year since the implementation of the Ninth Grade Initiative. The percentage of students who dropped out in four years fell by 13.1% during the course of the study, and dropped by an average of 3.7% per year since the implementation of the Ninth Grade Initiative.

Inferential Statistics Analysis of Data

The following are the results of the tests that were run to in order to disprove the null hypotheses.

Null Hypothesis 1.1

The implementation of the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade transition program will show no significant change in the persistence to high school graduation of Griffin High School.

A chi-square test was used to determine if there was a statistically significant relationship between participation in the TEXASISD Ninth Grade Initiative and persistence to graduation at the .05 level of significance. Results of the analysis, as found in table 4-6, indicate that a statistically significant relationship does exist in the participation in the TEXASISD Ninth Grade Initiative, and persistence to graduation. Since the p value of .002 is lower than the .05 level of significance, Null Hypothesis 1.1 is rejected.

Table 4.6

Chi-square Results for Participation in Ninth Grade Initiative and Persistence to Graduation

	Group, Class		
Status	No Treatment	Treatment	Total
Graduated in 4 years	792	943	1,735
Continuer	40	18	58
Dropped out	71	88	159
Total	903	1,049	1,952
	Chi2(2)= 12.4538	p= 0.002	

Null Hypothesis 2.1

The implementation of the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade initiative program will show no significant change in the persistence to high school graduation for the Hispanic subpopulation of Griffin High School.

A Chi-square test was used to determine if there was a statistically significant relationship between participation in the TEXASISD Ninth Grade Initiative and persistence to graduation of the Hispanic subpopulation at the .05 level of significance. Results of the analysis, as found in table 4-7, indicate that a statistically significant relationship does exist in the participation in the TEXASISD Ninth Grade Initiative, and persistence to graduation. Since the p value of .014 is lower than the .05 level of significance, Null Hypothesis 2.1 was rejected.

Table 4.7

Chi-square Results for Participation in Ninth Grade Initiative and Persistence to Graduation of the Hispanic Subpopulation

Hispanic only:		Group, Class	
Status	No Treatment	Treatment	Total
Graduated in 4 years	219	294	513
Continuer	22	10	32
Dropped out	32	46	78
Total	273	350	623
	Chi2(2)= 8.5921	p= 0.014	

Null Hypothesis 3.1

The implementation of the TEXASISD comprehensive ninth grade initiative program will show no significant change in the persistence to high school graduation for the economically disadvantaged subpopulation of Griffin High School.

A Chi-square test was used to determine if there was a statistically significant relationship between participation in the TEXASISD Ninth Grade Initiative and persistence to graduation of the Economically Disadvantaged subpopulation at the .05 level of significance. Results of the analysis, as found in table 4-8, indicate that no statistically significant relationship exists between participation in the TEXASISD Ninth Grade Initiative, and persistence to graduation. Since the p value of .171 is higher than the .05 level of significance, Null Hypothesis 3.1 was retained.

Table 4.8

Chi-square Results for Participation in the Ninth Grade Initiative and Persistence to Graduation of the Economically Disadvantaged Subpopulation

Economically Disadvantaged only:	Group, Class		
Status	No Treatment	Treatment	Total
Graduated in 4 years	190	265	455
Continuer	9	9	18
Dropped out	43	39	82
Total	242	313	555
	Chi2(2)= 3.5327	p= 0.171	

Summary

Chapter 4 was utilized to explain the findings of the research study. It was noted that the general trends following the treatment of the independent variable seemed to be very promising. The statistically analysis of the null hypotheses yielded mixed results, but still had positive outcomes. The final chapter in the study will contain an overview of the entire study as well as a discussion of the results, and the implications that the study will have for school leaders and further research.

Chapter Five

Conclusions

Griffin High School is a medium sized school located in TEXASISD. It is a suburban school district located outside a major city in Texas. Griffin High School introduced a ninth grade transition program in the 2003-2004 school year. The program itself consisted of a fish camp, SLC teaming, a pyramid of intervention, and participation in extracurricular activities. The goal of the program was to increase the percentage of students who passed all four-core areas during their ninth grade year. While it did achieve its initial goal of improving the number of students who passed all four-core areas during the ninth grade year, no attention was given to examine if the program was actually transitioning students to be successful in high school in its entirety.

Overview of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine what relationship, if any, existed between participation in comprehensive transition program and improved persistence to graduation. A comparison was completed utilizing the graduation status data from before the transition program was implemented (graduating class of 2007-2008) and the graduation status data for the three years following implementation of the transition program (graduating class of 2009-2011). Descriptive research statistics, and inferential statistical analysis were completed to try to identify if a relationship existed. The same test was also run on the Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged subpopulations for the years of study. This was done in response to the growing trends of these

subpopulations at Griffin High School. A chi-square test was utilized to compare the groups to look for significance.

The overall findings of the study indicate that participation in a comprehensive ninth grade transition program resulted in a positive, significant, relationship to most of the variables when compared to the group of students who did not participate in the program.

Discussion of Results

The results for this study are very promising for all school leaders who are looking for ways to improve the freshmen experience at their schools. Each research question was tested and 2 out of the three hypotheses ended up yielding positive results for the relationship between participation in the program and improved persistence to high school graduation.

Research question 1:

Does a significant relationship exist between the implementation and participation in TEXASISD's comprehensive ninth grade transition program at Griffin High School and persistence to high school graduation?

After examination of the results from the descriptive and inferential analysis it seems that Griffin High School's Ninth Grade Initiative program does have a positive relationship on improving persistence to graduation. The probability that the results happened by chance is only 0.2%. These findings are not only statistically significant they are also educationally significant. When the reported rates were examined for growth trends the statistical significance came as no surprise. The steady trend of growth for the number of students graduating in four years during the years of study show

persistence to graduation is not only improving but has reached one of the goals set up by the President of the United Sates and the nation's governors in "Goals 2000 Educate America Act", to increase the graduation rate of students to 90% (Fulk, 2003). During the years of study the graduation rate grew by a total 11.9%. The number of students dropping out in their first four years of high school fell by a total of 4.8%. The findings of this test are consistent with the findings that participation in a comprehensive ninth grade transition program will have a positive effect on school culture and long-term student academic achievement (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999b; Mizelle, 2005; Dedmond, Brown, & LaFauci, 2006).

Research question 2:

Does a significant relationship exist between the implementation and participation in TEXASISD's comprehensive ninth grade transition program at Griffin High School's Hispanic subpopulation and persistence toward high school graduation?

The Hispanic subpopulation is of growing concern to the Griffin High School and many schools across the nation. The Hispanic subpopulation is one of the fastest growing subpopulations in America. It also holds one of the highest drop-out rates in the United States (Miao & Haney, 2004). This makes finding solutions to improve the percentage of these subpopulations graduating in four years even more important. The results of the study show there is a statistically significant relationship between the Hispanic's subpopulation participation in the Griffin High School's Ninth Grade Initiative program and improved persistence to graduation. The probability that the results happened by chance is only 1.4%. This strong relationship should give hope to any school leader who is trying to find ways to improve the number of Hispanic students who graduate in four

years. The relationship also contains educational significance. Throughout the course of the study the percentage of students who graduated in four years grew by 19.4%. The number of Hispanic students who were dropping out decreased by 10.8% during the years of study. This trend shows amazing growth for the Hispanic subpopulation's persistence to graduation. These findings are consistent with the findings presented in the literature review in that the implementation of a plan of intervention for the Hispanic subpopulation did yield increased persistence to graduation (Rivera, 2009).

Research question 3:

Does a significant relationship exist between the implementation and participation in TEXASISD's comprehensive ninth grade transition program at Griffin High School's economically disadvantaged subpopulation and persistence toward high school graduation?

The economically disadvantaged subpopulation is on the rise in Griffin High School and throughout the state of Texas. Unfortunately the relationship between participation in Griffin High School's Ninth Grade Initiative program and the Economically Disadvantaged subpopulation's persistence to graduation is not significant. The probability that the results happened by chance was at 17%. This figure seems to leads the researcher to believe that issues involved with being economically disadvantaged seem to be bigger than a simple transition program can solve. However, the program does seem to have educational significance. Throughout the course of the years of study the percentage of students who were considered to be economically disadvantaged who graduated in four years grew every year. In the graduating class of 2011, 90.2% of the Economically Disadvantaged subpopulation graduated in four years.

That is a 22.6% jump from the first year of the study to the last. The percentage of students who dropped out fell to a low 6.5% in the year 2011, which is a drop of 13.1% from the first year of the study. Therefore, while the program didn't seem to have any statistical significance on the economically disadvantaged subpopulation, it did seem to have some educational significance for Griffin High School. These findings are consistent with the literature review in that child poverty is a very complicated issue that has many facets. Children who are economically disadvantaged or often in minority groups, and this compounds their likeliness to not obtain graduation (Orfield et. al., 2004)

Limitations

This study was restricted to a single campus in a suburban school district outside a major US city. It was limited to 1952 participants from the graduating classes of 2007-2011. The campus lost a portion of its students to a third high school being constructed during the 2008 school year. While the rate of teacher turnover was not high for the school of study, there was teacher turnover, so the level of effectiveness of teaching could not be controlled. Since total population was used instead of a sample, there was a variance in the percentages of students in each subpopulation throughout the years of the study. The principal of the school of study did change during the middle of the years of study, but the program did remain intact. However, varying administrative styles could affect the teaching and achievement of any of the groups in the study.

Implications for School Leaders

The importance of the transition from junior high to high school can't be ignored. It is important not only for their success in the ninth grade but also will play a role in the

likelihood that a student will graduate in four years. In a study completed by Fulk (2003) it was noted that if a student fails the ninth grade once, there is a 50% chance that the student will drop out of school. If that same student ends up failing the ninth grade twice, the likelihood of that student graduating high school is almost nonexistent.

School leaders need to be concerned with the transition that students go through as they enter the ninth grade. Time and consideration needs to be spent ensuring that a transition plan is in place that meets the needs of a diverse student population.

The transition program itself will need the guidance of students, teachers, parents, counselors, and administration to make sure that all students' needs are being met. It will only be through this type of collaboration that the most effective transition program possible will be made available to students. The transition program needs to include components to help with the social, behavioral, and academic needs of students. School leaders must divert human and monetary resources to make sure that these transition programs remain successful.

Recommendations

1. Considering the improvements in the graduation, continuer, and dropout rates, school leaders should conduct further in-depth research into the implementation of ninth grade transitions programs.
2. School leaders around the country to examine the costs associated with the implementation of transition program, and begin looking for ways to conduct some time of transition program for their campuses.
3. The freshman transition programs should be comprehensive in nature and provide multi-faceted levels of support for all ninth grade students.

4. Schools should implement increased levels of professional development to ensure that teachers are prepared for giving the support they need to make all ninth grade students successful. Training should include vertical alignment of curriculum between the eighth and ninth grade, social and behavioral training, and special training on working with economically disadvantaged students.
5. Hiring experienced teachers who want to work with ninth graders is a crucial component of a successful ninth grade transition program. The hierarch system currently in place in today's high schools need to be abolished to ensure that the needs of students over teachers are being met.
6. Special attention needs to be given to the economically disadvantaged subpopulation. New areas of concentration need to be added to a freshman transition program with the aims of improving this subpopulation's persistence to graduation.
7. A transition team should be developed utilizing the eighth grade and ninth grade teachers, counselors, and principals for the incoming freshmen.
8. This team can collaborate on ways to make sure that the transition program is operating at its highest levels possible.
9. Students should be surveyed prior to their entry, and after their completion of the transition program to make sure that all of their needs are being met.
10. Some aspects of the transition program should be implemented in higher grades. Transition is a process not an event, and their needs to be supports in place for the upper levels of a high school.

Implications for Further Research

1. This study should be expanded to include other schools that implemented a transition program similar in scope to the one created by Griffin High School. The schools should be from a more diverse background, and should include both rural and urban settings.
2. Studies should be conducted comparing freshman transition programs to stand-alone freshmen academies. Since stand-alone freshman academies take the idea of freshmen support and isolation to its ultimate level, studies should be utilized to examine if they will produce better results than simply having a transition program.
3. A more comprehensive in-depth study should be conducted on the school of study after the program has been in place for a few more years to ensure that the growth in persistence to graduation continues.

Conclusion

The percentage of students graduating has been on the rise in the last 5 years, however, minority students and students labeled as economically disadvantaged are still lagging behind the national averages. The gap between these groups must narrow if we are going to be able to improve the drop-out crisis in our schools. School leaders across the country are looking for ways to improve their student's persistence to high school graduation. The pressures to improve accountability measures across subpopulation groups have these leaders more and more looking at the ninth grade as way to get all of their students ready. The need for a comprehensive transition program for entering ninth graders is apparent. With the plethora of literature that alludes to the importance of the

ninth grade year in terms of predicting persistence to graduation (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999b; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Lan & Lanthier, 2003), coupled with the literature that supports the implementation of ninth grade transition programs (Dedmond & LaFauci, 2006; Mizelle, 2005; Smith, 2007), the inevitable conclusion is that comprehensive ninth grade transition programs can help improve student persistence to graduation.

This assertion is important to all school leaders in that it will help provide a framework that can be utilized and replicated to help improve persistence to graduation nationwide. This particular study is of importance in that it provides a study that fills the hole in the research dealing with the ninth grade and persistence to graduation. This study links the research that states that the ninth grade is crucial to persistence to graduation, and the research dealing with how ninth grade transition programs help students become successful in the ninth grade. Just having a freshmen transition program that makes students successful in the ninth grade is not enough. The scope of these programs must be much larger. The freshmen transition program should be constructed in a way that it not only helps students pass the ninth grade, but that it is helping students be successful for their entire high school career. This is an area in which the research needs to be greatly expanded. More studies need to be conducted to see if the results found in this study can be replicated.

One area of research of particular note is how to improve the graduation persistence of the economically disadvantaged. This subpopulation seems to be impervious to the benefits of the transition program. It would seem that being poor trumps the interventions that the school of study put into place to help students be

successful. School leaders should be looking for new, innovative ways to help this struggling subpopulation.

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APPENDIX A

APPROVAL FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON SUBJECT RESEARCH COMMITTEE

UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

DIVISION OF RESEARCH

February 6, 2013

Kade Griffin
c/o Dr. Allen R. Warner
Dean, Education

Dear Kade Griffin,

Based upon your request for exempt status, an administrative review of your research proposal entitled "EXAMINING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PARTICIPATION IN A FRESHMAN TRANSITION PROGRAM AND PERSISTENCE TO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION" was conducted on January 16, 2013.

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 **January 1, 2018**. 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: 13204-EX

APPENDIX B

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH FORM

GOOSE CREEK CONSOLIDATED INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT
DR. SALVADOR CAVAZOS
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

February 4, 2013

Kade Griffin
6806 Hunters Creek
Baytown, TX, 77521

Dear Mr. Griffin:

Let this letter serve as Goose Creek CISD's acceptance of participation in your research regarding freshman transition programs, and their impact on continuer rates, cohort dropout rates and cohort graduation rates. I understand that you are conducting research to meet the requirements of your Doctoral Dissertation for The University of Houston Executive Educational Doctorate program.

Goose Creek CISD values the potential benefits that your research can provide to our district, and agrees to grant you permission to access the district's data. It is our understanding that students' names as well as our district's name will be kept confidential.

Please feel free to contact me with any information you may need. Goose Creek CISD looks forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Dr. Salvador Cavazos
Superintendent of Schools

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