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A Case Study Exploring the Transition to Middle School From the Perspective of Students

Kelly A. Rappa
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2012

Abstract

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Middle School From the Perspective of Students

By

Kelly A. Rappa

M.A., Kean University, 2003

M.A.T., The College of New Jersey, 2000

B. A., Rutgers University, 1996

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Administrative Leadership for Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The transition to middle school is often associated with negative effects on academic achievement, motivation, self-esteem, and psychological well-being. Educators at a Grade 6 through 8 middle school in the northeastern United States observed students struggle with the adjustment to middle school. Research suggests that developmentally responsive schools can significantly reduce the potential negative impact of middle school adjustment. Drawing upon developmental theories from the works of individuals such as Piaget, Erikson, and Maslow, the purpose of this single-case study was to capture the opinions, thoughts, and perceptions of the students transitioning into middle school to better understand how they perceived their developmental needs were supported and where additional support was necessary in order to facilitate a smoother transition to middle school. Three focus group interviews, one for each sixth grade team, were conducted. Additional data were obtained by reviewing anonymous student writing samples completed for the school's transition team. Both data sets were analyzed by applying a typological analysis process. Data analysis indicated students believed the transition programs effectively oriented them to procedural aspects of middle school; however, students expressed the need for additional academic and social-emotional support as their first year of middle school progressed. Findings guided the development of a facilitator's guide for student support groups wherein additional academic and social-emotional assistance can be provided to students in transition. Implications for social change include a proactive program that promotes student achievement and positive social-emotional development.

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Dedication

I dedicate my work to the children...to my children, Siena and Antonio, and all of “my children” who give me purpose, inspiration, and reason to go to school each and every day. I especially thank those children who were brave enough to stand up for themselves and express their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives.

Acknowledgments

Walt Disney was often quoted as saying, “It’s kind of fun to do the impossible.” I couldn’t agree with Mr. Disney more! Five years ago I began my doctoral pursuit - a pursuit that often times seemed like an impossible dream. My desire to complete a doctoral program has finally come to fruition. This journey was truly an emotional rollercoaster, and I believe I would not have been able to achieve my goals without the support and encouragement of many people. These individuals have celebrated the little successes, shared in my frustrations, and helped pick me up when I felt like I had nothing left to give. Their unending encouragement and support allowed me to accomplish my impossible dream.

First and foremost, I want to extend my love and appreciation to my family. My mother and father, Carolyn and Bob, who have always believed that I can achieve anything I set my mind to regardless of how challenging the task. Over the years, my parents have provided me unwavering support and inspiration to be the best that I can be. Throughout my pursuit of this degree, they have spent nearly every weekend at my house watching my children so I could work. I have no idea how I will ever repay them for their love, encouragement, and time. Thank you both from the bottom of my heart.

I also thank my children, Siena and Antonio. My pursuit of this degree started before they were born. Needless to say, the challenges involved with completing a degree, working full-time, and raising twins was something of a miracle. I hope that as they get older, they will understand and appreciate their mommy’s hard work.

I would be remiss if I did not extend my heartfelt love and appreciation to my husband, Marlen. The past four years have been complete insanity for him. Thank you for

understanding and for putting up with an absent wife. Maybe now the house will finally be clean. Thank you for supplying the strength I often needed to push forward to finish my pursuit of this degree.

Special thanks go out to my colleagues at “Central Middle School.” Since 2004, they have tolerated many of my crazy ideas, went along with zany theories, and been a source of support and inspiration. The most impressive quality this group of people possesses is its relentless willingness to do what is good for kids, regardless of how much time or effort it takes. I especially want to thank Lou, Sue, Brian, the guidance counselors, and all of the teachers at CMS for their support and acceptance of my research project. Thank you all for listening as I fleshed out ideas during project development. Your encouragement is truly appreciated.

I would not be where I am today if not for the many female role models in my life who have inspired and encouraged me to become a strong, independent, intellectual woman in educational leadership. Mom, Mrs. P., Carol, Rose, and several exemplary teachers along the way, have helped me develop a vision of who I am and who I want to be. Each of these women has positively impacted my life, illustrating for me the endless possibilities available for strong, intelligent women. The life lessons I have taken away from each of them, led me to become who I am. I hope one day my daughter will be equally inspired to achieve greatness by the women in her life.

My passion for middle school teaming began after attending the National Middle School Convention in Philadelphia, specifically after hearing Randy Thompson, “the Edugator,” speak about the work of effective middle school teams. To say Randy’s presentation was inspiring is an understatement. His level of enthusiasm and passion for

middle school students was unlike anything I had ever seen. I followed Randy to Nashville the following year to hear him speak again. When talking to my teachers, I gushed about this man and his message. So, we brought him to our school to share his message with the whole staff. When I told Randy how he inspired my work, he offered his assistance and told me to reach out when I was finished. When I finished my project, I was so excited to share my work with him, only to find that Randy passed away unexpectedly. I am sad that Randy will not have the opportunity to truly know how much he influenced my work. I only hope I have made him proud.

Finally, I would like to thank the faculty and staff at Walden University that have helped me achieve my goals. In particular, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Martha Moore, for her continual advice and support, for understanding my vision for my research and steering me in the right direction. Also, I'd like to thank Dr. Tontaleya Ivory and Dr. Paul Englesberg for their contributions and feedback. Their commentary led to the development of a final product that I proudly present herein. In addition, my deepest thanks to Jeff Zuckerman, whose editing prowess I truly appreciate.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

Annually, 88% of public school students transition from an elementary school into the middle school setting (National Middle School Association & National Association of Elementary School Principals [NMSA & NAESP], 2002). When they were in elementary school, students typically had one teacher in one classroom, with one set of rules and expectations (Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin & Vigdor, 2007; NMSA & NAESP, 2002). Because students were in one location all day, if the student needed a book, a notebook, or a pencil, it was within close reach, either in their desk or their cubby on the side of the classroom. Often elementary school students were provided time for recess, allowing the opportunity for students to expend energy and socialize with friends (Pellegrini & Smith, 1993). Physical education class focused on the development of motor skills and interpersonal skills through fun, game-like activities, including dance, gymnastics, kickball, or other games created by the teacher that taught fitness in a fun way (Rink & Hall, 2008). Class work and homework were manageable and could usually be completed with enough time to go outside and play with other children in the neighborhood (Erlbach, 2003). As elementary school came to a close, many teachers discussed the expectations of middle school and differences that students will encounter as they move into their new school setting or students were invited to orientations conducted by the middle school (Perkins & Gelfner, 1995; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000; Williamson, 1993). When the final year of learning at the elementary school ends, for many students the anticipation of the first day of middle school looms overhead.

The transition to middle school comes at a developmentally challenging stage in the life of the young adolescent (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Knowles & Brown, 2000; National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2006; NMSA, 2003, 2010). Not only are students now expected to meet increased academic demands of the middle school, they are expected to understand the expectations and procedures of multiple teachers and to maintain a clear sense of organization always mindful of bringing the right book or notebook from their locker to the right class (NMSA & NAESP, 2002). Students in many middle schools are expected to eat lunch in a relatively short period of time and return to the rigors of their classes. Physical education class, for which students are now expected to change their clothes in front of their peers, no longer resembles the casual, game oriented physical education courses of the elementary school. When students arrive home, balancing the demands of homework assignments and projects with a life outside of school becomes another challenge (Erlbach, 2003; NMSA & NAESP, 2002).

Middle school is a time of change. The transition to middle school brings a significant change to the academic structure and organization of learning. Throughout the middle school years, students also undergo significant physical and social development. A growing body of research indicates schools that support the developmental needs of the students in transition through comprehensive transition plans and supportive learning environments can reduce the negative effects of the transition (Akos & Martin, 2003; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Jackson &

Davis, 2000; Midgley & Urdan, 1992; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 2003, 2010; Perkins & Gelfer, 1995).

Despite the growing number of research studies examining the various effects the transition from elementary to middle school has upon students' academic performance and social-emotional adjustment, few examine this event through the eyes of the students themselves (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Midgley & Urdan, 1992). Akos and Galassi (2004) remarked, "Isn't it surprising, however, that, in most of the transition research, the voices of those who are most directly involved – the students along with their parents and teachers - have been heard only infrequently?" (p. 2). The research that examines student perceptions often relies on quantitative survey data as the primary or only means of collecting information from student participants. Few studies employ qualitative methods to gathering data, using data collection procedures that include open-ended writing samples and individual interviews with students, in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the transition to middle school through the eyes and in the voices of the students themselves.

Definition of the Problem

In an effort to establish a developmentally appropriate learning environment for young adolescents and increase the level of support to students as they transition into middle school, Central Middle School (CMS, a pseudonym) has made a concerted effort to apply various strategies and techniques recommended in works by Jackson and Davis (2000), National Middle School Association (2003, 2010), and National Association of Secondary School Principals (2006). These seminal works on middle level reform provided a set of recommendations that when implemented as a system, often resulted in

an academic environment supportive of the unique developmental needs of the young adolescent. CMS's state assessment data indicate an increase in student achievement (State Department of Education, 2009) and computer generated statistics indicate a decline in disciplinary referrals for students entering sixth grade (L. D. F., personal communication, 2009).

Although the statistical data are important, statistical data present only a piece of the picture. Educators at CMS are interested in creating a complete picture of their efforts to support the students through their transition into middle school. To create a complete picture of CMS's efforts to support the students as they transition into the middle school, it is necessary to obtain a deeper understanding from perspective of the students about the transition from elementary school into CMS. Capturing and analyzing the opinions, thoughts, and perspectives of the young people experiencing the transition will enable school personnel to obtain a deeper understanding, from the students' perspective, of the transition from the elementary setting to the middle school environment. Student commentary will illustrate how they perceive their developmental needs are supported during the transition process and where students perceive additional support is necessary in order to facilitate a smoother transition.

Rationale for Choosing the Problem

Evidence from the Literature

There is much research to support the notion that the transition to middle school is a difficult one for the overwhelming majority of students as they undergo significant physical, social-emotional, and cognitive changes (Akos, 2002; Akos & Martin, 2003; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 1998; Chung, Elias & Schneider, 1998; Eccles, et al.,

1991; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993; Elias, Gara & Ubriaco, 1985; Elias et al., 1992; Elias, 2001; Elias, 2002; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Knowles & Brown, 2000; Lounsbury, 2009; MacIver & Epstein, 1991; Manning & Bucher, 2001; Midgley & Urdan, 1992; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 2003; Perkins & Gelfer, 1995; Theriot & Dupper, 2010; Wigfield, Eccles, MacIver, Midgley & Reuman, 1991; Zins & Elias, 2006). Several researchers have established a connection between the transition into middle school and the negative impact on academic performance (Alspaugh, 1998, Eccles & Midgley, 1989) and an increase in psychological-emotional distress (Chung et al., 1998; Eccles et al., 1993; Elias et al., 1992; Elias et al., 1985). Eccles et al. (1993) found a poor fit between the developmental needs of the early adolescents and the traditional junior high school environment.

Although numerous studies highlight the negative impact of the transition to middle school, other studies illustrate that middle schools that take into consideration the physical, social-emotional, and intellectual-cognitive development of these students when developing programs and activities, and when making instructional decisions will see a positive impact on the academic and social-emotional development of the adolescents, easing the destabilization frequently experienced by students (Akos & Martin, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Midgley & Urdan, 1992; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 2003, 2010; Perkins & Gelfer, 1995). Flowers, Mertens and Mulhall (1999, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d) illustrated the positive impact of interdisciplinary teams and teachers sharing common planning time (Flowers et al., 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d; Mertens, Anfara, Caskey & Flowers, 2010) on student achievement and social-emotional development. In schools where there is an effective transition program and students receive support from

the interdisciplinary team of teachers, students are far more likely to experience success in the middle school (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Cauley & Janovich, 2006; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; NMSA, 2002, 2010). Several researchers presented the positive effects of using transition or counseling groups to support students' emotional development during the transition from elementary to middle school (Akos, 2002; Akos & Martin, 2003; Perkins & Gelfer, 1995).

In order for students in this transitional stage of their educational careers and their lives to achieve success, schools need to act with the special developmental needs of the young adolescent in mind. Knowles and Brown (2001) remarked, "If we want students to be successful in middle school, we must pay attention to the changes in their development, understand the challenges that lie ahead of them, and listen to what they say" (p. 4). For students to be successful in middle school, research supports implementing developmentally appropriate strategies to meet their various needs. Furthermore, a comprehensive well-designed transition plan is recommended to support the needs of the students transitioning from one level of education to the next (Koppang, 2004; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000; Mullins & Irvin, 2000).

Multiple researchers have examined the academic and social-emotional effects students experience as a result of the transition into middle school. Within this body of research, several studies have taken into account the voices of the young people experiencing the transition (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992). Rather than collect student perceptions through questionnaires that require students to select from predetermined answer choices, these studies utilized open-ended response items and/or personal interviews to capture and then reflect upon the thoughts of

the students as they described their experiences during the transition from elementary to middle school. Each of these studies also recommended the need for additional research that captures students' opinions, concerns, and needs in order to further support the developmental needs of the early adolescents. Hearing the thoughts and opinions of the students themselves will help middle level educators and middle level leaders gain a better understanding of what their school is doing well to meet their developmental needs, what is being done well to ease the transition from elementary school, and what can be done more effectively to ensure student success in middle school and beyond.

Evidence at the Local Level

In the 2004-2005 school year, I became an assistant principal at CMS, which is located in a suburban school district in the northeastern United States. The school houses grades 6, 7, and 8, and has approximately 900 students. My previous experience in a middle school was limited to teaching English to seventh and eighth grade students for 1 year and my own experiences as a middle school student. My teacher training emphasized teaching literature to high school students. Although my teaching certification enabled me to teach grades 6 through 12, I had little foundation in teaching strategies to meet the needs of the students in middle school, nor had I the background to understand the unique developmental needs of the middle school student. Neither my teacher training nor my administrative coursework included preparation specifically targeting the middle level learner. Day after day, I reflected on the needs of the students: Who were they? What were they going through physically as they transitioned from children to young adolescents? What were their interests? What motivated them to

learn? What stood in the way of their learning? What were we doing as a school to support them through the transitions associated with the middle school years?

As the primary disciplinarian, it became clear that many of the problems I addressed on a daily basis came from the same small group of students. Many of the students were sixth graders who were new to the building, and unfamiliar with the rules and their responsibilities as middle school students. In my first year at the school, I observed many students failing their classes, and others whose behavior not only interfered with their ability to learn but disturbed others in their classes as well. Based upon reviews of student report card data and student discipline reports reviewed during administrative meetings (N. S. R., personal communication, 2005), sixth graders appeared to have a larger number of failures and were subject to more discipline for inappropriate behavior than students in other grades. I watched as teachers taught, but many students still struggled to succeed in the classroom. By the end of the school year, data reviewed at our summer planning meeting (N. S. R., personal communication, 2005) included the fact that of the 1,255 referrals that had been processed school-wide, 20% of those came from the sixth grade class. Of additional concern was the fact that 28% of the sixth-graders received at least one “F” over the course of the school year. Based on the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002), the school was labeled a School in Need of Improvement (SINI) by the State Department of Education for the second consecutive year (North Central Regional Educational Library [NCREL], 2002). Many of these students appeared to be floating into middle school from the elementary setting with little connection to the school or concern for their academic progress.

If CMS was going to make a difference in the lives of the students, the support and instruction provided to students needed to be reconsidered, and that process began with gaining an understanding of the middle school concept. CMS was a middle school in name only, preparing students for what they would be expected to do in the high school. The school reflected the ideas and principles of the old junior high school model more so than the middle school concept. The school's overall focus was somewhat misplaced. So much time and energy was focused on preparing students for the expectations of high school that their developmental needs as they exist in the three years of middle school were not often taken into consideration. Educators at CMS could no longer afford to watch the incoming sixth grade classes struggle to meet the demands of the middle school environment. Something had to change. Something more needed to be done in order to meet the needs of the children transitioning from elementary to middle school.

During the summer planning session, following the 2005-2006 school year, end-of-the-year reports indicated 415 referrals, or 21.1% of all of the referrals processed, came from sixth graders (N. S. R., personal communication, 2006). The types of referrals, as well as informal conversations with staff, parents, and students, indicated that many of the problems stemmed from a lack of awareness of school rules and individual student responsibilities. The idea that middle school rules and expectations are different from elementary school was often presented. Staff, students, and parents often expressed concern about the extreme contrast between the structure and expectations in elementary school and those of the middle school setting. Eighty-one students in the sixth grade received at least one failing grade during this school year. As a result of state test data

(State Department of Education, 2006), the school was once again labeled a SINI school by the State Department of Education (NCREL, 2002).

CMS's formal transition plan consisted of a 2 hour session in May, when elementary school students visited the school. This program allowed incoming students to watch a video presentation showing the school grounds and explaining basic rules. Older students put on a short play illustrating the myths of middle school. Before leaving, students were given some paperwork about the school; no other information was given to the students about their new school until they arrived on the first day in September. Parents of incoming students were invited to attend an evening discussion about the school. During this event, administrators and counselors spoke to the parents in a large group forum for an hour, and then dismissed the program by sending parents home with additional handouts about programs, school rules and policies, and building activities. The first few days of sixth grade, students' schedules were modified to allow the teachers the opportunity to review all of the school rules and distribute paperwork and books to students.

Reading the existing research on the middle school concept helped educators at CMS realize that an effective transition into middle school is not a one-day event, but a process that occurs over time (Akos & Martin, 2003; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Koppang, 2004; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). As a school, time was spent learning about strategies that are recommended in the literature on the middle school concept. These concepts are introduced in the literature review. CMS's interdisciplinary teams - teams that had last received training on the middle school model in 1997 - went through a rejuvenation process beginning in 2006, receiving professional development training on

the purpose and goals of interdisciplinary teams. Throughout the year, the sixth grade teams focused on developing team names and a sense of identity. The three teams solicited feedback from the students to determine team names, logos, mascots, T-shirts, and banners. The teachers incorporated team building activities to build a sense of community in the sixth grade. Students participated in team spirit days, attended after school ice cream socials, and attended after-hours movie nights. The teachers arranged academic *Jeopardy!* challenges between classes, Scrabble tournaments, and vocabulary spelling bees. Throughout the year, students were recognized with *B.U.G. awards* (Bringing Up Grades) during team assembly programs and students who were “caught in the act” of performing a random act of kindness for another student or staff member were recognized for their good deed.

To support the teams through their rejuvenation process, I attended national middle school conventions and conducted independent research on best practices in highly effective middle schools. Strategies such as effective use of common planning time to examine curricular connections and increase student achievement, creating a master schedule with the developmental needs of the children in mind, using the team as a vehicle for increasing parental communication, creating Individualized Student Plans (ISP) for struggling learners, and creating shared rules, expectations, and classroom procedures were ideas that were shared with teams, and implemented within the school over the subsequent years.

Teachers were assured 46 minutes of daily team planning time and 46 minutes of individual planning time. Administration and guidance attended team meetings on a

regular basis to discuss team concerns and to support their growth and improvements in student achievement.

The middle school concept and the developmental needs of the middle school student as described in middle school journals was explored during team meetings, faculty meetings, and in-services. Based on middle level research, CMS educators began to recognize that meeting the developmental needs of its students, especially of those students in transition, would be the best means of helping students achieve success academically and socially. To learn more about the characteristics of young adolescents, faculty and team meeting time was used to learn about their social and emotional needs, their physical needs, and their intellectual needs. The developmental characteristics of the early adolescent are described within the review of the literature. Developmentally appropriate strategies that would help the fifth graders have an easier transition into middle school were implemented throughout the sixth grade.

During the 2006-2007 school year, the school underwent another transition as a result of the retirement of the building principal. The new building principal continued to develop the focus on implementing best practices in middle level education. He emphasized the need to focus on improving individual student achievement via instructional practices that support the learning needs of the students in the middle school. To support the concept of interdisciplinary teaming and to ease the students' transition from elementary to middle school by making a big school feel small, teachers' classrooms were relocated. The new organization allowed all sixth grade classrooms to be located on the lower level of the school and specific teams to be grouped together in the same hallway. Students' lockers were also relocated into their team's hall. Teams

decorated their halls to reflect their individual team's identity and expectations. Teachers established common classroom rules and procedures, which were provided to students and parents. During the teams' common planning time, teams were directed to utilize their time to include 2 "kid days," 2 curriculum days, and 1 day for guidance or administration. "Kid days" were reserved for discussions about individual students, team event planning, strategies for reducing student failures, and any other conversations specifically focusing on student achievement. Curriculum days were set aside for the discussion of topics including instructional practices, lesson reflection, cross-curricular connections, character education projects, and strategies for meeting the needs of struggling learners. The teams' efforts to improve instructional practices were also evident in the school's ability to make the NCLB benchmark of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Doing so put the school on hold, allowing the school the opportunity to have students continue to make sufficient academic improvement for an additional year in order to be removed from the State Department of Education's SINI list (State Department of Education, 2007).

To begin the 2007-2008 school year, one of the sixth grade teams chose to pilot a summer orientation program for incoming students. Students received letters from their team teachers inviting them to attend a half-day orientation the week before school opened. The teachers planned team building activities, presented rules and responsibilities important for the students to know for the first day of school through a slide show, conducted a building tour, and distributed student schedules. Informal discussions following this event with students indicated that these students saw themselves as better prepared to meet their teachers' expectations than students who did

not participate in a summer program. Throughout the year, teams also used “kid days” to create individualized student assistance plans to focus on interventions specifically designed to help struggling learners. The school continued to provide professional development to teachers on the best practices of effective middle school teams and professional learning communities, inviting middle school expert Randy Thompson to present on its in-service days.

In May, prior to the fifth graders coming to CMS for their visit, the sixth grade counselor and I went to each of the elementary schools to meet the students. We discussed important items for students to know for the first day of school and answered individual student questions about the school. The following week, the fifth graders visited CMS over the course of 2 days. The orientation program for the fifth graders was reconsidered and reformatted. The new format resulted in smaller groups which allowed increased conversation between the student ambassadors and the in-coming students. Following a formal presentation that seventh and eighth grade students created about life in middle school, the ambassadors sat with groups of students answering questions and talking about their own experiences moving into middle school. The parent program also changed. Rather than administrators and guidance staff speaking to one large group of parents, smaller sessions allowed groups to be interactive with building leaders, counselors, and teachers.

At the end of the 2007-2008 school year, discussion at our summer planning meeting indicated that fewer students received one or more failing grades during their sixth grade year than in the previous year (L. D. F., personal communication, 2008). The school also made AYP again, removing them from the State Department of Education’s

SINI status (State Department of Education, 2008). Despite the progress in academic areas, educators at CMS still expressed concern over discipline referrals sixth grade students accumulated over the course of the year for what seemed to be avoidable infractions.

As a result of the success of the pilot summer orientation, all three sixth grade teams conducted an orientation during the last week of August to begin the 2008-2009 school year. Throughout the school year, teams discussed more curriculum-related issues and focused efforts on improving educational experiences for students during their common planning period. Professional development continued, emphasizing the successful attributes of professional learning communities. Discussions during summer planning sessions focused upon the positive impacts on student achievement that were evident in the continued reduction in student failures from the previous school year (L. D. F., personal communication, 2009). Feedback from sixth grade teachers indicated that students appeared to more clearly understand expectations, resulting in fewer students receiving referrals for general rule violations (L.D.F., personal communication, 2009). According to state assessment data from the 2008-2009, the school, once again, made its AYP goals (State Department of Education, 2009).

At the end of the 2009-2010 school year, as a result of the weakened economy and dramatic cuts to the school budget, CMS faced multiple challenges. The cuts resulted in the loss of seven teaching staff members, a crisis intervention counselor, four teacher coaches, and the guidance counselor who worked with the sixth grade. In addition to staffing cuts, all after-school programs, including academic assistance programs, were lost. To make matters more challenging, when state assessment results arrived, because

of newly elevated benchmarks, CMS did not make AYP goals in one subgroup, putting the school back on the Needs Improvement status (State Department of Education, 2010).

Despite the challenges that educators at CMS knew were ahead for the 2009-2010 school year, efforts to improve the orientation program for students entering sixth grade continued with the inclusion of a new component. In late May, the sixth grade counselor and I went to the elementary schools to visit the students. Following our visit, the fifth graders visited CMS in two smaller groups. These groups convened in the cafeteria for a brief information session that included meeting the building principal and the other guidance counselors. The students were then divided into 15 small groups and invited into the sixth grade classrooms. The sixth grade classes prepared discussion points and allowed the fifth graders the opportunity to ask current sixth grade students questions about experiences in middle school. Sixth grade teachers served as facilitators for the 45-minute session. In August, the students were invited to their team orientation. Three separate team orientations were conducted prior to the opening of school. These sessions were well attended, with only 10 students out of 260 not in attendance.

Over the course of the 2010-2011 school year, all teachers at CMS became active members of professional learning communities (PLCs). For the sixth grade teachers who have dedicated time for collaboration, PLC time was the opportunity for them to extend their work to reach more students. Teachers spent an exorbitant amount of time analyzing state assessment data, looking for trends in student achievement. Teams then developed plans to target skill sets identified as in need of improvement within each classroom on the team. ISPs were redefined to address the targeted areas in need of improvement, and a student portfolio created that allowed the teachers to compile data for every student on

the team. Every teacher on the team monitored student portfolios to ensure that each child had a plan that would allow him or her to make improvements specific to his or her needs. To provide extra academic assistance, teachers voluntarily made themselves available before school hours to those students whose parents could drop them off at school. Nearly all of the sixth grade teachers developed “Lunch Bunches,” where they offered a quiet refuge to complete homework, an opportunity to receive extra assistance, or a place to access a computer to complete on-line assignments. Lunch bunches were voluntary for most students, and often, more students chose to be in their teachers’ classrooms than in the cafeteria. Although in several cases, lunch assistance was required for students who were not mastering concepts and/or not completing homework. The loss of the crisis intervention counselor and the third guidance counselor greatly impacted the students of CMS. Situations that were once resolved through counseling, often escalated to disciplinary referrals due to the lack of proactive support staff available to resolve potential conflicts. As a result, there was an increase in disciplinary referrals school-wide. However, the sixth grade had the fewest disciplinary referrals from staff.

The efforts of CMS to consciously focus upon implementing developmentally appropriate strategies to ease the students’ transition into middle school can account for the numerous positive changes witnessed. It is easy enough to look at the computer data and listen to teachers’ anecdotes and assume that if referrals are down and grades are up, the efforts of the school to ease the transition from elementary to middle school are successful. However, missing from that data are the voices of the young people whom those statistics represent. In an effort to realistically portray the school’s efforts thus far, and continue to build upon the positive changes witnessed to date, it is critical to reflect

upon the perceptions of the young people to gain a deeper understanding of what they perceive is being done well to support them through the transition into middle school. The students' perceptions also lend insight into where improvements in the school's transition program can be made. Only by capturing the opinions, thoughts, and perceptions of the young people experiencing the transition can the success of the school's efforts to support these students truly be measured. The voices of the young adolescents who leave the security of their one teacher and comfort of their one classroom for the vastness of the middle school are an important component in creating a vivid picture of the students' transition into CMS.

Significance of the Problem

With the transition to middle school occurring at a point in the students' lives when they are also undergoing significant physical and emotional changes, it is critical to student success that schools respond appropriately to support the physical, academic and cognitive, and social and emotional development of young adolescents (Eccles et al., 1993; Elias et al., 1985; Elias et al., 1992; Elias, 2001; Elias, 2002; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Knowles & Brown, 2000; MacIver & Epstein, 1991; Midgley & Urda, 1992; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 2003, 2010). The negative impacts to academic achievement and social and emotional development can be minimized significantly if a comprehensive transition plan is in place (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; NMSA, 2002, 2010) and schools implement developmentally appropriate techniques to ease the transition into middle school (Akos & Martin, 2003; Eccles et al., 1993; Gutman & Eccles, 2007; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2006; Zins & Elias, 2006).

If students are allowed to continue to transition from grade level to grade level without intervention, it would be considered malpractice and, in 2014, when all students are expected to achieve proficiency in line with NCLB regulations (NCREL, 2002), one could conclude many students will be in jeopardy of achieving the desired level of success. Examining transition programs and the support structures in place for students transitioning from elementary to middle school will allow middle school educators the ability to create programs that would positively impact student achievement and disciplinary profiles in a manner that supports their developmental needs (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003, 2010; NASSP, 2006). The implementation of an effective transition program can have the effect of allowing students to experience a sense of belonging, to reduce anxiety, and to increase motivation to be successful (Akos & Martin, 2003; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Elias et al, 1992; NMSA, 2002). Research exists that provides strategies to middle level educators for more effectively meeting the developmental needs of their students, thereby increasing the likelihood that middle school students will be met with success academically and socially (Akos & Martin, 2003; Eccles et al., 1993; Elias, 2001; Gutman & Eccles, 2007; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2006; Zins & Elias, 2006). Within that body of research, the reflections of the students themselves are seldom included to provide additional insight into program and structural needs to support the young adolescent through the difficult transition from elementary school into the middle school setting (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992). Learning about the transition from elementary to middle school directly from those currently experiencing it can provide invaluable information for middle level educators across the nation, enabling educators the opportunity to better

meet the developmental needs of today's young adolescents and ease the transition to secondary education, thereby increasing the possibility that young adolescents will achieve success in middle school and beyond.

Definition of Terms

Educators from different regions may interpret educational jargon differently as a result of their own conceptual filters and educational experiences. Therefore, the following definitions of terms used throughout the research project are provided to allow for a clear understanding of concepts as intended:

No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In 2001, President George W. Bush reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as No Child Left Behind, public law 107-110. The law requires schools to ensure high-quality educational opportunities for all students (NCLB, 2002). In March of 2010, President Barack Obama released the "Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act," proposed changes to NCLB, which call for all students to be college- and career-ready by the year 2020. The proposal has yet to be voted upon by Congressional leaders.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). In line with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, states are to establish formulas to show how students are making Adequate Yearly Progress (NCLB, 2002). AYP involves a predetermined percentage of students scoring "Proficient" on the state exam.

School in Need of Improvement (SINI). In line with NCLB guidelines and state regulations, schools are identified as in need of improvement based on their inability to achieve AYP goals and to show progress toward achieving state standards. After 2 consecutive years of being identified as a SINI school, schools are required to engage in

an assistance plan where they are expected to develop improvement plans, provide professional development for staff to improve instructionally, and provide parents with information on school choice. If the school is identified for improvement for 3 consecutive years, students may be eligible to receive supplemental services. After 4 years, corrective action is taken where schools are expected to make critical changes to the learning environment. If improvement is still not made, schools may face wholesale restructuring including state takeover or closing of the school (NCREL, 2002).

Middle school. Within the context of this study, the middle school structure contains students in grades 6, 7, and 8.

Early or young adolescence. The period of time that encompasses ages 10 to 14. Early adolescence usually coincides with the departure from elementary school and ends with the departure from middle school (George & Alexander, 2003).

Transition strategies. For the purposes of this study, transition strategies are referred to as programs, resources, or practices that are specifically used to support students in transition from elementary to middle school.

Interdisciplinary team. Middle school interdisciplinary teams are designed as a means of organizing students such that all students share the same core academic teachers. The creation of smaller teams creates small learning communities (Thompson & VanderJagt, 2001). In this case study, the middle school utilizes an interdisciplinary team approach, organizing incoming sixth graders into three teams of approximately 100 students each. Teacher teams consist of two English teachers, one math teacher, one science teacher, and one social studies teacher.

Pure teams. A group of students, roughly 100, assigned to one team of teachers. All of the students are assigned to the same teachers' classes as members of the same learning community. In a school with approximately 300 students per grade level where pure teams are maintained, three teams within each grade level, or nine teams building-wide, would exist.

Team time. Common planning time built into a teacher's schedule intended to be utilized for collaboration between team members. Team time is independent from and/or in addition to individual planning time.

Guiding Questions

The data generated from existing research about the transition from elementary to middle school illustrate the potential for students to experience declines in academic performance (Alspaugh, 1998, Eccles & Midgley, 1989), increases in psychological distress (Chung et al., 1998; Eccles et al., 1993; Elias et al., 1992; Elias et al., 1985), increases in disciplinary referrals (Theriot & Dupper, 2010), and decreases in motivation and self-esteem (Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Wigfield et al., 1991). Additional research concludes that schools that respond to meet the developmental needs of the students in transition through comprehensive transition plans and supportive learning environments can reduce the negative effects of the transition (Akos & Martin, 2003; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Midgley & Urda, 1992; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 2003, 2010; Perkins & Gelfer, 1995).

Few studies present information from the perspective of the adolescents experiencing the phenomenon (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992). Consequently, the purpose of this project study is to capture the perspective of the

students experiencing the transition into middle school in order to obtain a deeper understanding of how students perceive their developmental needs are or are not being supported throughout the transition from elementary school into CMS. Therefore, the following questions guided this case study research:

Focus Question: How do students transitioning from their elementary schools into CMS describe the support, or lack thereof, which they received throughout the transition?

1. How do students describe their feelings about the transition from elementary to CMS?
2. How do students perceive their physical needs or concerns are or are not supported?
3. How do students perceive their social-emotional needs or concerns are or are not supported?
4. How do students perceive their intellectual-cognitive needs or concerns are or are not supported?
5. When evaluating the current transition programs in place at CMS, what do students describe as strengths and/or areas for improvement?

Review of the Literature

The literature review is broken into several different sections. The first part discusses the history and development of middle schools. The next section explores the physical, social-emotional, and intellectual-cognitive characteristics that are commonly used to identify middle school students. The third section discusses several seminal works that provide the theoretical foundation for effective, developmentally responsive middle

schools. Much research on middle school structure, effective practices, and programs stem from philosophies presented in these work describing the middle school model. The remaining sections examine research studies conducted that specifically pertain to the transition into middle school from the elementary setting and strategies to support students in transition.

History of the Middle School

In the early 20th century, American educational institutions restructured in an attempt to better meet the needs of the children being served (Lounsbury & Brazee, 2004; Manning & Bucher, 2001; McEwin, Dickinson & Jenkins, 2003). The two-tiered structure of an 8-year elementary and 4-year high school was no longer seen as sufficient. Junior high schools grew out of the need for something to exit students from elementary school and prepare them for the challenges of high school. However, junior high schools became little more than miniature versions of the high school (Manning & Bucher, 2001). Classes were departmentalized and the overall focus of the junior high school was on preparing the students for the high school curriculum. George and Alexander (2003) stated:

The junior high school was seen, ironically, as too secondary, as having been too successful in bringing the high school program down to what had been elementary school grades. Critics charged that the departmentalized, high school- or university-style organization of teachers caused more problems than it solved.

Organizing teachers by the subject they shared was, critics asserted, too abrupt a change from predominantly self-contained classrooms of the elementary school.

(p. 41)

Because the structure and programs were so similar to that of the high school, the new junior high schools failed to meet the needs of the students and did not achieve the results educators desired. McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins (2003) noted the decline in popularity of the junior high school model was largely because “by most measures junior high schools failed to reach their full potential and too frequently became miniature versions of the senior high school” (p. 3). The sharp contrast between the junior high school and the elementary school created a breeding ground for student failure (George & Alexander, 2003; Lounsbury & Vars, 2003). Jackson and Davis (2000) called the junior high school model “a volatile mismatch” between the structure of the junior high school, its curricular goals, and the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of the developing adolescent (p. 2). Midgley and Urdan (1992, p. 7) termed the traditional environment of a middle level school a “developmental mismatch” because the structure and environment that existed often did not take into account the developmental needs of the early adolescent. The elementary school structure allowed students to learn within the confines of a self-contained classroom, with one teacher, whose expectations for behavior and academic performance were the same from one subject taught to the next. The elementary school teacher catered to the students’ social and emotional needs, allowing the classroom and school to establish a warm, comfortable environment clearly at odds with the overwhelming coldness and size of its junior high school counterpart. Once students entered the junior high, they were expected to rise to the expectations set for them. By and large, that expectation was not achieved by schools across the nation (Lounsbury, 2009; Lounsbury & Vars, 2003; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993).

Collaboration among teachers in the junior high school was uncommonly practiced, either among department members or across the content areas. Teachers worked in isolation, and students experienced learning in isolation (Carnegie Council, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Lounsbury, 2009, Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991, 1993). Students typically had seven different teachers, with seven different sets of expectations for classroom behavior and academic achievement. Each class was completely independent of each another (George & Alexander, 2003; Weaver-Jadallah, 2005).

Advocacy for the modern middle school, with its sixth, seventh, and eighth grade configuration, began in the 1960s when researchers touted the need for middle level reform (Lounsbury & Vars, 2003, p. 6). The 4-3-3 grade level configuration of the junior high school model popularly accepted across the country, was failing to meet the needs of the students, and, therefore, failing to prepare them for further education or the work force (George & Alexander, 2003). Grantes et al. (1961) described the junior high school environment as a school with an identity crisis just as severe as the identity crisis faced by many of the students it served. The characteristics of the desired school included overall smaller size, blocked instructional periods, flexible scheduling options, teachers prepared to meet the needs of the young adolescents, modern instructional practices, and rich guidance services.

The middle school movement emerged in the early 1960s (George & Alexander, 2003; Lounsbury, 2009) based upon the recognized need for change to the existing junior high school model. Alexander and Williams (1968) gave educators and policymakers a new model that inspired the middle school reform movement. Their vision included a shift in organizational structure, allowing the middle school to service young adolescents

in Grades 5 or 6 through 8. The vision of the new middle school included not only a focus on academics, but also on the social and emotional development of the 10- to 14-year-olds it served. George et al. (1992) concluded that “high quality middle schools result from a balance between elementary and secondary perspectives, between specialization and generalization, between curriculum and community, between equity and excellence, between teaching the mind and teaching the heart” (p. 9). It became widely recognized by researchers that if true academic success were to occur, successful middle schools could not only teach a high school or college preparatory curriculum, but they must also address the developmental needs of students in the middle grades (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Knowles & Brown, 2000; Manning & Bucher, 2001; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 2003, 2010).

The American middle school, as it currently exists, has undergone significant changes in structure and program in the 4 decades since its inception. As research studies are conducted and published, educators seek these research-based strategies and recommendations that benefit the development of middle level learner. Forty years after the onset of the middle school movement, “the middle school is clearly the dominant form of education for the young adolescent in America” (George & Alexander, 2003, p. 43). Over time, the middle school structure has become the target of criticism, especially with the pressures created by NCLB for schools to demonstrate proficiency on state mandated tests. “The general public’s perception, based largely on newspaper stories, that the middle school has been a failure is a result of the inability or unwillingness of critics to recognize between the ‘middle school concept’ and ‘the middle school’ as it commonly practiced” (Lounsbury, 2009, p. 32). Research conducted in the

1990s supports the fact that the reason behind poor performance amongst middle school students is not a failure of the middle school model, but that of schools who ineffectively or impartially implement the strategies associated with the middle school model, thus making them middle schools in title only (Jackson, Andrews, Holland & Pardini, 2004; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Advocates of middle level education argue that it is not the failure of the middle school concept, but the incomplete implementation of the concept's theory that often results in students and middle schools not reaching their full potential (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003, 2010). If middle grade students are going to achieve success academically and socially, educators need to have a clear understanding of the developmental needs of the young adolescent and the research-based strategies and techniques proven to meet their needs, thereby allowing them to be successful.

Who Are the Kids in the Middle?

The transition that takes young people from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood occurs over a series of years. Lounsbury and Vars (2003) pointed out, "Children do not leave childhood one year and become young adolescents the next" (p. 7). It is critical that middle level educators recognize what adolescents experience developmentally during the middle school years to support them through the years spent in middle school, often considered turbulent times or "the roller coaster years" (Gianetti & Sagarege in Lounsbury & Vars, 2003, p. 7), and with good reason. "Middle level classes are made up of men, women, and children, plus those who are at various points in between" (Lounsbury & Vars, 2003, p. 9). These "tweens," students caught between childhood and adolescence, go through developmental changes at different rates and in different stages.

Thompson and VanderJagt (2001) described teaching young adolescents in middle school as being

like trying to work with Jell-O. Every time you think you have it going in the direction that you want, it starts to wiggle and move in all directions. If you try to get a hold of Jell-O, it squirts right through your fingers. (p. 5)

Students in middle school undergo more changes physically, emotionally and intellectually and at a rate more rapid than any other time in their lives, comparable only to that during fetal development (Faber, 2001; George & Alexander, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Knowles & Brown, 2000; NMSA, 2003, 2010). The students in the middle are “fast-growing, hard-charging, ever-changing young adolescents who can make their parents and teachers proud, peeved, and perplexed from one minute to the next” (Jackson et. al., 2004, p. 4). Understanding the developmental stages of these young people can help educators develop programs better suited to meet their unique needs. It is by taking into consideration the developmental needs of the young people that educators can make informed decisions about the learning environment and instructional decisions. Doing so can result in engaged, responsive students who are more motivated to participate in their learning (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003, 2010).

Developmental Characteristics

In the literature on adolescent development and the middle school model, the developmental characteristics of young people are commonly delineated into three general categories. Throughout this study, for organizational purposes and to remain consistent with the literature that exists on adolescent development, the developmental characteristics are broken into the following categories: physical, social and emotional,

and intellectual and cognitive. These characteristics will be described in more detail in the following sections. It should be made clear, however, that while these categories are being compartmentalized for discussion, in reality they often intertwined and are interconnected in the lives of the young people.

Physical characteristics. During the middle school years, teens are experiencing physical changes rapidly and intensely, second only to that during the first 2 years of life (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2006; Manning & Bucher, 2001). As a result of a surge of hormones and rapid physical development, within the 3 years of middle school, girls transition into womanhood and boys into manhood. The rapid growth and physical changes lead teens to feel uncomfortable within their own skin and apprehensive about their personal appearances (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Faber, 2001; Jackson et. al., 2004; Knowles & Brown, 2000). Knowles and Brown (2000) describe adolescents as individuals who are often

looking at themselves in every mirror they can find, they will often see an alien body staring back. Whether it's in the bathroom mirror at home or the one hung in their locker, the reflection in the window of a car, the door knob to their classroom, or cafeteria spoon, middle school students watch themselves, convinced everyone else is watching them too. (p. 11)

The stranger an adolescent sees staring back at him can be four or more inches taller than when the student transitioned into middle school. Adolescents may also experience weight gains of as much as ten pounds a year. The rapid growth often leads to awkwardness and a lack of coordination (Faber, 2001; Scales, 2003). Awkward and

seemingly uncoordinated, students who demonstrated skill in a physical activity may suddenly find themselves tripping over their feet (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Scales, 2003). Students in middle school are statistically more likely to have broken limbs, be on crutches, or sustain bruises than any other age group (Faber, 2001).

While all adolescents develop at varying rates, research has shown that girls undergo growth spurts “about two years earlier than boys” (Knowles & Brown, 2001, p. 14). Middle school girls, therefore, tend to be extremely self-conscious of their appearances (Scales, 2003). Barker and Bornstein (2010) compared self-esteem, appearance satisfaction, and self-reported dieting. They found that girls who had a lower body mass index (BMI) at age 10 often had higher self-esteem and higher levels of appearance satisfaction than girls whose BMI was higher at age 10. Girls who were less satisfied with their personal appearances at age 10, continued to show declines in self-esteem by age 14 (Barker & Bornstein, 2010). The self-consciousness with personal appearances can not only result in negative impacts to self-esteem, but can interfere with adolescents’ ability to apply themselves to the academic tasks of the middle school (Chung, Elias & Schneider, 1998; George & Alexander, 2003). In another study that illustrated the adolescents’ concern for being similar to their peers, Shirtcliff, Dahl, and Pollack (2009) found that adolescents often overestimate their level of pubertal development when they are at lower stages of development than their peers, and underestimate if they are at more advanced stages of development. They concluded that adolescents will distort their reporting in order to appear at the stage that is most developmentally appropriate for their age.

Middle school teachers often find themselves telling their students to “sit still.” Middle school students’ inability to sit still is not always a direct act of insubordination, but could easily be linked to changes to their skeletal structures as they experience the painful process of having their tailbones fuse and harden (Anfara & Caskey, 2007; Scales, 2003; White, 2009). As the adolescent body becomes longer and leaner, it has less padding surrounding the fusing tailbone. The chairs schools provide their students often do not take fusing tailbones into consideration. The discomfort that is associated with the fusing of the tailbone and the growth of other bones, joints, and muscles often results in irritability and fatigue (Faber, 2001; Scales, 2003). The tiredness that teens often describe can also be associated with extreme growth spurts (Knowles & Brown, 2000; Manning & Bucher, 2001). Students’ fatigue is often in direct contrast to sudden bursts of energy resulting in a need to move (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Scales, 2003).

Young adolescents also appear to have insatiable appetites and, therefore, eat much and eat often (Faber, 2001; White, 2009). However, teens also have “a propensity for improper nutrition” (Caskey & Anfara, 2007, p. 2). Despite the body’s need for increased levels of good nutrition to ensure proper development, many teens make poor food choices (Scales, 2003; White, 2009). “It is not uncommon for a young adolescent to eat continuously from the time they get home from school until bedtime. Unfortunately, due to the cultural prevalence of fast food, many of these kids are not eating foods that give them the maximum benefit” (Knowles & Brown, 2000, p. 14). White (2009) conducted a study surveying middle school students across six states. Students identified whether or not they had eaten breakfast. Of the respondents, 72% indicated they had eaten breakfast that morning. Of those students, 91% indicated they had a sugar-based

cereal, soda or an energy drink, or donuts or a pastry item. While students in the study claimed to be eating breakfast, White concluded that what teens ate for breakfast directly impacted their ability to focus and learn. Adolescents need the guidance of their parents and the adults who surround them at school, to support them in learning to make sound choices (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003, 2010).

Young adolescents also experience hormonal surges between the ages of 11 and 14. The increase in hormones assists the body in making the transformations necessary to allow for the development of primary and secondary sex characteristics, which ultimately result in the body's ability to reproduce.

The most dramatic increase for males is in testosterone – levels of this hormone are sometimes eighteen times what they were before puberty. The primary increase for females is in the hormone estradiol – levels are approximately eight times what they were before puberty. (Nottelmann et al., as cited in Knowles & Brown, 2000, p. 13)

The development of secondary sex characteristics, those characteristics that others can see that classify one as a male or female, generate further impetus for young adolescents to be preoccupied with their appearances and how others perceive their development (Barker & Bornstein, 2010; Scales, 2003). Changes to the body including the development of breasts, growth of underarm and pubic hair, and changes to the voice tend to be sources of embarrassment, and often lead to issues of reduced self-esteem (Barker & Bornstein, 2010; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Manning & Bucher, 2001; VanHoose, Strahan & L'Esperance, 2001).

Recent studies in brain development of the young adolescent have begun to reveal more intense changes occurring in the teenage brain than was once believed (Geidd et al., 1999; Giorgio et al., 2010; Lenroot & Geidd, 2006; Sowell et al., 1999; Sowell et al., 2001). Geidd et al. (1999) described a process where the frontal portions of the brain, those responsible for critical thinking, organizing, judging, planning, and strategizing go through a growth, otherwise known as thickening. The brain over-produces cells and connections, and then experiences a competitive elimination, in which brain cells fight for survival (Geidd et al. 1999; Giorgio et al. 2010; Lenroot & Geidd, 2006; Sowell et al., 1999; Sowell et al., 2001). Research concludes that the skills the teens practice and engage in while experiencing this brain growth and development become hard-wired, as pruning of gray matter occurs. As adolescents grow older, the grey matter decreases and the white matter increases (Giorgio et al., 2010). Therefore, teens who sit on the couch playing video-games and watching television will have those brain connections solidified. This “use it or lose it” model of brain development, strengthens the recommendations in middle school research for schools to support the physical well-being of students and provide curriculum that is challenging and explores student skills (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003, 2010; NASSP, 2006).

At a time in their lives when adolescents are engaging in a process of self-discovery, they often also engage in risky behaviors. In an interview with PBS Frontline (2002) for the documentary *Inside the Teenage Brain*, Giedd commented on the effects on the brain when teens use drugs or alcohol:

It’s a particularly cruel irony of nature, I think, that right at this time when the brain is most vulnerable is also the time when teens are most likely to experiment

with drugs and alcohol. Sometimes when I'm working with teens, I actually show them these brain development curves, how they peak at puberty and then prune down and try to reason with them that if they're doing drugs or alcohol that evening, it may not just be effecting their brains for that night or even that weekend, but for the next 80 years of their life. (¶8)

Research conducted on the adolescent brain has indicated that the area of the brain needed to make informed, adult-like decisions is underdeveloped which may serve as a reason why teens often engage in risky behaviors (Geidd et al. 1999; Giorgio et al., 2010; Lenroot & Geidd, 2006; Sowell et al., 1999; Sowell et al., 2001). The undeveloped brain prevents adolescents from appropriately rationalizing the future impact that their actions may have on their lives and on the lives of others (Geidd et al. 1999; Standen, 2007).

According to the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, the Center for Disease Control reported 6.7% of young people, between 12 and 17, claimed to have used marijuana, 3.3% used prescription drugs for non-prescription purposes, and 1.2% used inhalants. Alcohol use among this age group was reported to be 15.9%, with 9.7% who engaged in binge drinking (having five or more drinks on one occasion) or 2.3% who engaged in heavy drinking (drinking on at least five occasions in the last 30 days). Of the 4.6 million people who tried alcohol for the first time, 85.9% were under the age of 21. The report also identified 9.8% of individuals between 12 and 17 use tobacco products. Of the 2.2 million people who tried smoking for the first time, 59.7% were under the age of 18. While these statistics painted a frightening picture of the risks taken

by the youth in America, nearly all of the percentages were lower than the previous report conducted in 2002 (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

Social and emotional characteristics. For the first time, students in middle school may be faced with the challenges of becoming increasingly conscious of their friendships. They begin to experience “extreme self-consciousness and self-focus in concern about relationships with friends and adults outside the home” (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000, p. 2). They may begin questioning the “acceptability” of someone with whom they have been friendly throughout elementary school. The rules of friendships undergo changes, and suddenly an interest may develop in having a relationship. Manning and Bucher (2001) explain the change in social behavior by saying that “friendships and social networks are expanding; allegiances and affiliations are shifting from adults to peers; their self-esteem is growing; and their lives are often plagued by mood swings” (p. 34). The emotional rollercoaster that denotes the social and emotional development process in middle school can be an enormous hurdle for students to overcome, and it can be a major hurdle standing in the way of academic success (Anderman, 2003; Eccles et al., 1993).

Middle school students begin to question who they are as individuals: What makes me who I am? What do I like or dislike, and why? How can I be an individual, but still fit in with the “in” crowd? Development of identity can be helped or hindered based upon the experiences students have throughout middle school. “For [Erik] Erikson, the task of adolescence – what all adolescents must do – is the establishment of one’s unique identity. Erikson described adolescence as a necessary turning point” (George & Alexander, 2003, p. 19). Identity development happens based upon the experiences,

challenges, and dilemmas one faces. Erikson's (1968, 1980) theory of social and emotional development identified eight stages people experience as they develop their identity. Each stage has a specific purpose and occurs within a designated age range. Erikson also claimed that the inability to successfully transition from one stage to the next significantly impacts the identity development of that individual.

Middle school students pass through two different stages of development during their three years in the middle school (Erikson, 1968, 1980; Manning & Bucher, 2001; Mooney, 2000). The first stage Erikson (1968) referred to as industry vs. inferiority. Within this stage of development, the adolescent needs to meet success when accomplishing various tasks in order to develop his sense of self-worth and importance. Failure or the inability to complete these tasks could affect the individual's self-esteem and impact future successes. The second stage Erikson (1968) referred to as identity vs. role confusion. It is within this stage that the adolescent tries to separate himself from adults and seeks the acceptance of his peer group. During this stage many adolescents experience confusion or experience doubts about their identity as they are on a "quest for independence and identity formation" (NMSA, 2007, p. 3).

For the adolescent searching for a sense of personal identity, there is an overwhelming need to belong to a group and please peer groups, as suggested by Erikson (1968, 1980), which often results in the development of a social hierarchy within the middle school. "Without a doubt, peers represent a powerful and often underestimated source of influence in the social, academic, and overall development, behavior, and attitudes of young adolescents" (Manning & Bucher, 2001, p. 36). Therefore, students in middle school can be torn between pleasing their friends or their families. All too often

the parent of a teen can be heard telling the story of her daughter who ranted and raved at her for an hour, but later that night snuggled with her on the couch over a cup of hot chocolate. Teens often snub their family in public and hug them in the privacy of their own homes (Faber, 2001).

The conflicting messages young adolescents receive from their peer groups, the media, and their brains place them in a constant state of social and emotional upheaval. The adolescent's search for personal identity and peer acceptance often results in a young person comparing herself to others. Such an act can lead to further feelings of frustration, vulnerability, anxiety, and self-consciousness (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2007). Research shows a link between the transition to middle school and a decline in adolescents' self-esteem (Anfara & Schmidt, 2007; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Wigfield, et. al. 1991). However, in middle schools where there is a supportive environment and a comprehensive transition plan, the negative impact is not as severe (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003, 2010).

Elias (2006) noted that a need exists for deliberate, explicit social-emotional skill instruction to take place not only at the elementary level, but at the secondary level as well. Schools that routinely infuse social-emotional skill instruction into the school program witness positive impacts on student performance, school climate, and students' ability to succeed beyond the school (Zins et al., 2004; Zins & Elias, 2006). The incorporation of social-emotional skill instruction has also been linked to reduced risk of maladjustment, violence, discontent, and disciplinary issues (Zins et al, 2004; Zins & Elias, 2006). Elias (2006) commented, "Children also benefit from coordinated, explicit,

developmentally sensitive instruction in the prevention of specific problems, such as smoking, drug use, alcohol, pregnancy, violence, and bullying” (p. 7).

The incorporation of a research-based social-emotional skill building program and/or character education program that regularly and formally provides students with the opportunity to discuss and explore issues in a constructive, supportive venue can lead to positive outcomes emotionally, as well as academically (Elias, 2006; Zins et al., 2004).

Character education and social-emotional skill instruction have long been considered a responsibility of the school in order for its citizens to become active participants of American democracy (Brown & Elias, 2006; Noddings, 2005). Former presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush highlighted the need for such instruction in their State of the Union addresses (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007), and many state governments and boards of education have established standards requiring schools to include character instruction into instruction (Brown & Elias, 2006).

Berkowitz and Bier (2007), in collaboration with the Character Education Partnership, conducted an investigation of existing character education programs to identify those that are supported by scientific research and are considered effective, where the program was found to have “significant positive outcomes” (p. 31). Thirty-three programs were found to be effective. Many of the effective programs provided direct instruction to students in areas such as reducing violent behaviors, reducing misbehavior, learning to follow rules, developing decision making skills, learning to collaborate with others, learning to get along with others, showing respect for others, developing effective communication skills, developing the ability to set goals and achieve the desired goals, and developing a sense of responsibility toward school and community

(Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). The most effective programs also utilized multiple means of implementation in order to ensure a comprehensive program within a school setting. The Six Pillars of Character (The Josephson Institute, 2010) which include kindness, fairness, civility, caring, trustworthiness, respect, and responsibility, are the theoretical foundation behind many different character based programs. Berkowitz and Bier (2007) found that because Character Counts is a framework, it is inconsistently incorporated in schools, although its messages and outcomes are positive.

As students enter middle school, the messages from their peer groups and the more adult programming they watch and listen to often are a source of confusion for the developing adolescent. “Young adolescents often feel rushed to socialize too early, to engage in cross-sex relationships, to participate in adult activities, and to see events from perspectives beyond their years” (Manning & Bucher, 2001, p. 38). Middle school students may not think they need or want the assistance and support of adults, but at this confusing point in their lives, the support of adults is critical to the adolescent’s development (Jackson & Davis, 2000; VanHoose et al., 2001). Likewise, parents often assume that middle school represents the point in a child’s life where they can and should begin to step-back allowing their child more independence. It is, however, critical for parents to maintain an active role in their teen’s life, providing them with the guidance and support that will transition them from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009; Yo & Singh, 2008). In fact, Chambers, Hylen, and Schreiber (2006) found that the more parental and peer support at-risk middle school students had, the higher their general achievement scores.

When students feel a sense of belonging and a connection to their school community, there is evidence of increased motivation, as well as increases in academic achievement (Akos, Creamer & Masina, 2004); Akos et al., 2007; Anderman, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003, 2010; NASSP, 2006; Zins et al., 2004). According to stage-fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993), the changes in adolescent development coupled with the changes in the learning environment are likely to lead to greater levels of difficulty for students when the developmental needs of the adolescent are not taken into consideration for programmatic, structural, or curricular decisions. In a developmentally responsive middle school, the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging through the use of interdisciplinary teams (Boyer & Bishop, 2004; Brown, 2001; Flowers et al., 2007b; Flowers et al., 2007c; Flowers et al., 2007d; Flowers et al., 2007e; Gutman & Eccles, 2007; Kokolis, 2007; Wallace, 2007), or advisory groups (Anfara & Brown, 2001; Burkhardt & Kane, 2005; MacIver & Epstein, 1991; Rottier, Bonetti, Meyer & Woulf, 2009; Thompson & VanderJagt, 2002) have been associated with increases in academic achievement and positive social-emotional development in adolescents.

Studies have been conducted that focused on exploring the differences between the brains of young adolescents and the brains of adults (Casey et al., 2000; Geidd et al., 1999; Lenroot & Geidd, 2006; Sowell et al., 1999; Sowell et al., 2001; Tiemeier et al., 2010). The use of the magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machine has allowed researchers to explore brain development in healthy children and adolescents without the potential health risks that were posed by x-rays or other machines that used radiation (Casey et al., 2000; Lenroot & Geidd, 2006, Sowell et al. 2001; Tiemeier et al., 2010).

The use of MRI research has reinforced the notion that during adolescence the portion of the brain that allows individuals to perform complex thinking and comprehend social cues is not developed or utilized the same way as it is during adulthood (Baird et al., 1999; Lenroot & Geidd, 2006).

Research conducted by Baird et al. (1999) measured brain responses as participants identified emotions presented on the faces of people in pictures. The findings indicated that adults uniformly identified the expressions as fear, but half of the teens saw shock or anger. The researchers concluded that about half of young people have not yet developed the mental capacity to draw the same conclusions as an adult, that the portion of the brain that operates reasoned perceptions, the frontal lobe, is not activated during adolescence as it is in adulthood (Baird et al., 1999). These conclusions support the findings of other research, where examination of MRI pictures of the teenage brain revealed delayed development of the frontal lobes (Geidd et al., 1999; Lenroot & Geidd, 2006; Sowell et al., 1999; Sowell et al., 2001). Researchers believe the portion of the brain that performs more of the thinking functions, the prefrontal cortex, is not frequently activated by the teen involved in a situation simply because it has not yet fully developed. The research, therefore, suggests that many teens experience difficulty interacting in social situations because their brains have not yet developed the capacity for them to engage in adult-like thought processes.

While their physical appearances as young men and women may lead one to believe that adolescents should be able to make better decisions, research conducted by Geidd et al. (1999) suggested that the teens' physical development is about 2-years ahead of their brain development. Research suggests that by taking into consideration the stages

of brain development when working with the students, teachers may be able to accomplish more academically and help students see the social and emotional impact of their actions (Geidd et al., 1999; Shaw et al., 2006).

Intellectual and cognitive characteristics. The changes in educational structure from elementary to middle school come at a time period in the adolescent's life which cognitive development theorists identify as a time of great transition. Piaget (1950) identified four stages of cognitive development. Middle school students operate in a state of flux between what Piaget called the concrete stage, including ages 7-12, and the formal operations, including ages 12 and older. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, most students will be in the concrete operational stage as they enter middle school and, by the time they are exiting middle school, experience formal operational thought. According to Piaget's (1950) theories, while students are in the concrete stages of cognitive development, understanding and working with abstract concepts is challenging, and sometimes impossible, for their developing minds. Piaget described the stages of cognitive development in adolescents as follows:

Formal thought reaches its fruition during adolescence. The adolescent, unlike the child, is an individual who thinks beyond the present and forms theories about everything, delighting especially in considerations of that which is not. The child, on the other hand, concerns himself only with action in progress and does not form theories, even though an observer notes the periodical recurrence of analogous reactions and may discern a spontaneous systemization in his ideas. (Piaget, 1950, p. 163)

Based on Piaget's (1950) theoretical perspective, a student entering middle school may not be cognitively prepared to meet the expectations established by a traditional secondary level classroom without additional assistance being provided and attention being paid to the developmental learning needs of the individual. It stands to reason that a student, who is required to draw inferences about a piece of literature or comprehend concepts in an Algebra course, may experience difficulty if he is still operating in the concrete stages of cognitive development. At some point during the middle school years, students will transition from concrete to abstract learning (Piaget, 1950). They will obtain the mental maturity that allows them to analyze, question, and hypothesize (Lounsbury, 2009).

Research studies have found that intellectual engagement occurs more often when students are actively engaged in the learning process rather than serve as passive recipients of information (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Lounsbury, 2009). The popular lecture model used in many secondary educational facilities will, therefore, not likely result in high levels of learning for the majority of students in the middle school. Students benefit from lessons that utilize a variety of instructional practices that target different learning modalities, allowing students to interact with concepts in a manner that suits their learning styles (Gardner, 2006; Elias, 2006). Adolescents also benefit from the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of concepts in a variety of ways (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005; Tomlinson et al., 2009). Educators that balance the use of formal and informal assessments, traditional and performance or project-based assessments, allow students to demonstrate mastery of learning in a manner that supports the student's approach to learning (Gardner, 2006;

Elias, 2006). Differentiating instruction allows students to grapple with concepts in order to meet the individual learning needs of each student (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson, 2009).

Students transitioning from elementary to middle school can quickly and easily fall into a pattern of failure. Sometimes all it takes is one failure to begin a pattern of failing. “Often one failure leads to additional failures or the expectation of failing” (Manning & Bucher, 2001, p. 44). Based on the developmental theories previously discussed, it is clear that each adolescent develops at her own pace; therefore, each adolescent may not be adequately prepared to meet extremely high expectations without additional assistance, causing a pattern of failure. It is critical that educators monitor the level of difficulty and amount of work assigned to students, and then create a balance that allows the work to be challenging, but also allows the student to feel supported in meeting academic success (Caskey & Anfara, 2007). “Educators should beware of piling on so many educational experiences that young adolescents feel overwhelmed or frustrated. These feelings can hurt motivation or cause feelings of resentment” (Manning & Bucher, 2001, p. 44). Teachers on effective interdisciplinary teams can utilize common planning time to collaborate and coordinate assignments and assessments, allowing students the opportunity to focus on specific content without becoming overwhelmed (Thompson & VanderJagt, 2001; Thompson, 2008).

A goal with young adolescents is to keep them engaged in their learning and excited about their abilities to learn. In line with the information on brain development previously discussed, young adolescents need to be engaged in critical thinking and problem solving to activate their brains during this critical stage of brain development in

order to strengthen the connections that will survive and last into their adult lives (Geidd et al., 1999; Giorgio et al., 2010; Tiemeier et al., 2010, Shaw et al., 2006).

Throughout their years in middle school, young adolescents will develop “personal attitudes and perspectives toward other people and institutions...young adolescents often voice concerns about injustices received by individuals or groups of people” (Manning & Bucher, 2001, p. 43). Middle school students who are developing opinions and perspectives often argue with teachers about the fairness of a situation. They may or may not be able to provide a rational reason to support their thoughts, and often will not be able to identify with the adult’s point of view, which could be largely due to the difference in stage of cognitive development or the physical changes occurring within the brain itself (Geidd et al., 1999; Tiemeier et al., 2006). Planning lessons to incorporate real world connections to students’ lives and creating authentic learning experiences allow students to develop the reasoning skills and foster the intellectual growth necessary for them to appropriately interact with their world (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Scales, 2003).

Intuitively people know that sleep impacts educational experiences. Researchers have established connections between student achievement and the amount of hours students sleep per night (Carskadon, 2002; Wolfson & Carskadon, 1998; Wolfson et al., 2003). Students who reported fewer hours of sleep were more likely to achieve lower overall grades (Wolfson & Carskadon, 1998). In young adolescents, researchers found that teens’ biological clocks shift, keeping them awake at night and making them sleepy during the day (Carskadon, 1999; Drake et al., 2003). These same studies showed a link to sleepiness and students’ ability to be attentive. While research indicates teens require 9

¼ hours of sleep to be rested and focused, most are not able to receive this amount (Carskadon, 1999; Carskadon, 2002; Taras & Potts-Datema, 2005). Based upon this information, it is reasonable to conclude that students' sleep patterns could have an impact on their ability to learn and focus in the classroom. School districts across the nation have examined this research, and some have elected to push back school start times in order to allow students additional sleep time. There is some controversy surrounding this philosophical stance as there is limited research to support the effectiveness of such a change (Taras & Potts-Datema, 2005). In a middle school setting, creating a schedule that allows the younger children to have academics early when they are most alert, and the older students to have their academics later, allowing them time to wake up and reach a greater level of attentiveness is worthy of consideration (Merenbloom, 2005; Merenbloom & Kalina, 2007; White, 2009; Williamson, 2009).

Middle School Model

With the knowledge that “adolescents are interesting, passionate, and capable people who become temporarily inconsistent between the ages of 10 and 14” (Jackson et. al., 2004, p. ix), middle level educators owe it to these young people to think about educational practices in a way that is different from their elementary or high school counterparts. The middle school model emerged as a means of allowing the middle school structure to aptly meet the various developmental needs of its student population. “The middle school movement ensued because visionary and caring educators and parents understood then – and many still do today – that children ages 10 to 14 need developmentally appropriate stimulation, challenges, and support to reach their full potential” (Jackson et. al., 2004, p. 28). Schools across the nation subscribed to the

concept, and adapted their staffs and buildings to accommodate the students in the middle.

Recommendations by the National Middle School Association (NMSA), the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) have been published in the form of comprehensive field guides for middle level educators to use in order to establish developmentally supportive educational environments. These three organizations have published and republished their position papers and goals for middle level education since the early 1980s. Middle level educators and researchers on effective middle school practices turn to these works as the cornerstone to developing developmentally responsive middle schools. Understanding the history behind and the recommendations of the pivotal works is essential in allowing middle schools to function effectively in order to meet the individual needs of the students in transition.

In a position paper, NMSA (1982) proposed essential elements evidenced in a true middle school. In a revised edition, NMSA (2003) promoted 14 characteristics present in effective middle schools throughout the nation. In an effective middle school, the 14 characteristics interact as a complete system in order to impact the entire school structure, the total learning environment (NMSA, 2005). Recently, NMSA (2010) released another revised edition that takes into account research recently conducted and global influences that have influenced characteristics that middle schools must possess to be effective in meeting the various needs of the middle level student. This edition establishes four essential attributes of an education for young adolescents as developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable. Based on the

attributes, 16 characteristics of effective middle schools were developed. These characteristics are grouped into three categories: curriculum, instruction, and assessment; leadership and organization; and culture and community. NMSA (2010) outlined the following 16 characteristics as the cornerstone of effective middle level schools:

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment: educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them; students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning; curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant; educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches; varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.

Leadership and Organization: a shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision; leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices; leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration; ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices; organizational structures foster purposeful learning.

Culture and Community: the school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all; every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate; comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents; health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies; the school actively involves families in the education of their children; the school includes community and business partners. (p. 14)

The 16 characteristics operate interdependently within an effective middle school. Research findings support positive outcomes for students in middle schools where these

16 characteristics are infused into the programs, structure, and curriculum (NMSA, 2010). Anfara et al. (2003), Felner et al. (1997), and Mertens and Flowers (2006) found schools demonstrating higher levels of effective middle school practices produced increased positive outcomes for students in academic, social-emotional, and cognitive development.

When the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) presented its report on middle level education, it was seen as “groundbreaking” information for middle level educators (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. x). The report provided educators with a “valuable framework” for middle level education in order to make changes to better meet the needs of the often ignored group of students in the middle (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. xi). Although the recommendations were similar to those of NMSA (1982) and NASSP (1985), the Carnegie Council report received more attention. George, Beane, Stevenson, and Thompson (in Anfara, 2001) speculated that “perhaps because of the public prestige associated with the members of the commission, and because of the quality of the work previously completed by other Carnegie groups, *Turning Points* has received a great deal more public attention than earlier studies” (p. xiii). Through their work, the Carnegie Council brought middle level education to the forefront of discussions and paved the way for changes in middle school reform efforts (Anfara, 2001). The Carnegie group sponsored grants for middle schools who utilized their recommendations, opening the door to another level of middle level research and change in middle level education (Anfara, 2001; Jackson & Davis, 2000). McElwain, Dickinson, and Jenkins (2003) reported the dramatic decline in the number of junior high schools between 1970,

when there were 4,711 public schools organized grades 7-9, and in the year 2001, when only 632 junior high schools remained (p. 44).

Jackson and Davis's (2000) report and recommendations were developed based upon the original recommendations of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989). Jackson and Davis (2000) reflected upon research conducted in the 10-years following the original recommendations and compiled best practices surrounding seven recommendations for effective middle schools. The seven recommendations were developed based on "well researched practices that have been found to contribute individually and collectively to the most important goal of middle level education – *ensuring success for every student*" [emphasis in original text] (Jackson et al., 2004, p. 31). In short, middle level educators are presented with the challenge of creating a positive and productive learning environment that is developmentally responsive and which challenges students to be reflective, critical thinkers who take an interest in others within their community and the world at large (Jackson & Davis, 2000). The recommendations called for middle levels schools where teachers utilize instructional methods that inspire student achievement to teach a rigorous, standards-based curriculum that is relevant to the lives of young adolescents. Similar to NMSA (2003, 2010), Jackson and Davis (2000) called for schools that are staffed with educators who are "experts," well versed in strategies for reaching middle level students (p. 24). They also called for a school climate whose core centers around the development of learning communities that allow students to foster personal, caring relationships both with adult advocates and fellow students. Included in the recommendations was also the importance of actively involving students' families in their child's learning, making families partners in the

adolescent's educational process (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Ten years after Jackson and Davis's (2000) recommendations were published; their recommendations and strategies are still seen as pivotal to creating effective middle level schools across the United States.

National Association of Secondary School Principals (2006) released a field guide containing 30 recommendations for middle grades improvement. NASSP noted that their recommendations are similarly aligned to the models established in NMSA (2003) and Jackson and Davis (2000). These recommendations exist under nine cornerstone principles that are organized under three cluster areas: collaborative leadership and professional learning communities; personalizing your school environment; and making learning personal: curriculum, instruction and assessment. Throughout the field guide, NASSP (2006) offers practical application and implementation information from experts in the field of middle level education.

It is important to recognize that the recommendations from each of the organizations are not intended to be a checklist from which educators pick and choose elements for implementation within their schools. Instead, the ideas are meant to be "characteristics and practices" (NMSA, 2005, p. xv) that are interrelated creating a system, "an interacting and interdependent group of practices that form a unified whole" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 27) within which young adolescents are educated.

After recommendations by Jackson and Davis (2000), NMSA (2003, 2010), and NASSP (2006) were implemented in middle schools across the country, researchers began seeking evidence to examine the effectiveness of the recommendations. Although all of three cornerstone works clearly indicated their recommendations are designed to be implemented as a system, where each recommendation works in conjunction with another

for maximized benefit to the middle school student, many schools across the nation, for a variety of reasons, have implemented individual recommendations or strategies rather than the whole system. Even so, research has indicated that schools that partially implement recommendations or implement several recommendations simultaneously have seen positive impacts on student outcomes (Anfara & Brown, 2001; Brown, D., 2001; Brown, K., 2001; Felner et al., 1997; Flowers et al., 2007a; Flowers et al., 2007b; Flowers et al., 2007c; Flowers et al., 2007d; Flowers et al., 2007e; McCaffery, 2008, Mertens & Flowers, 2006).

MacIver and Epstein (1991) surveyed middle school principals from 2,400 schools. The study focused on examining the schools' use of (a) advisory periods, (b) interdisciplinary teaming, (c) remediation for struggling learners, and (d) transition programs for students moving into the middle school from the elementary setting, and for those exiting the middle school to the high school. Findings indicated that schools that utilize developmentally responsive practices effectively have the potential of seeing a myriad of positive outcomes. However, the researchers noted that effective practices cannot simply be put in place but need to be implemented properly to yield the desired positive outcomes. For instance, simply organizing staff members into interdisciplinary teams without providing necessary support and training will not yield the same results as a well-trained and supported team of teachers. The study also reported clear benefits for students who participated in a well-developed transition program.

Felner et al. (1997) examined the effects of implementing the recommendations of the Carnegie Council (1989) in relation to student achievement, social and emotional development, and student behavior. The study focused on 31 middle schools in Illinois in

regard to four structural components associated with middle school: (a) teaming with common planning time, (b) reduced numbers of students assigned to the teams, (c) the use of frequent or regular advisory periods, and (d) the use of effective instructional practices for young adolescents. Surveys were administered to school personnel, students, and parents. The data analysis revealed that schools that demonstrated high implementation of these structural elements also had high levels of student achievement. Students also reported higher levels of self-esteem and were involved in fewer disciplinary problems.

Mertens and Flowers (2006) examined the effectiveness of Middle Start, a comprehensive school reform initiative. Participating schools were designated into three categories: comprehensive school improvement schools, comprehensive school reform demonstration schools, and control group. In this study, findings supported the fact that schools that infuse high levels of middle school practices experienced higher levels of student achievement than schools that do not infuse middle school practices. An additional finding was that low socio-economic schools saw greater increases in student achievement over time than the wealthier schools participating in the study.

Flowers et al. (1999, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e) and Mertens et al. (2010) found repeated connections to student achievement and the use of effective middle school practices. Throughout their research studies, they found schools that had teams with high levels of common planning time experienced higher levels of student achievement. The size of the team and amount of common planning time positively or negatively impacted student achievement (Flowers et al., 1999; Mertens et al., 2010). On teams that were too large, students did not receive the same level of individualized

attention, and teachers who were not guaranteed regular common planning time did not have the ability to collaborate about instruction or discuss students. Teachers with a background in educating middle school students are more likely to infuse instructional practices that are most appropriate for the young adolescent, which positively impacts student achievement (Flowers et al., 2007c; Flowers et al., 2007d). Consistent throughout the research by Flowers et al. (1999, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e) were the findings that effective use of interdisciplinary teaming was associated with positive academic and social-emotional outcomes for students on effective teams. Effective interdisciplinary teams not only focus on improving student achievement, but on the development of relationships. Flowers et al. (1999) found that teaming had a positive impact on school climate and allowed for increased communication with families. The positive effects are not only with the students. Teachers who worked on effective teams also expressed greater satisfaction with their jobs and level of support by the other educators in the learning community (Flowers et al., 1999; Mertens et al., 2010).

Exploring the Transition from Elementary to Middle School

Long before the seminal literature on the middle school model or theory on effective middle level practice was developed, educators recognized that the transition into junior high school was a difficult time for students across the country. In 1974, Hamburg stated:

It has been clear for some time that the entry into junior high school probably represents the most abrupt and demanding transition in an individual's entire educational career. This is a crisis period that has important educational as well as personal consequences. (p. 23)

Yet, over 30 years later, the concern Hamburg raised is still relevant. Research on the transition into middle school clearly illustrates that many students experience a destabilization (Elias, 2001) during the transition into the middle school environment. During this transition, students often experience declines in academic achievement (Alspaugh, 1998, Eccles & Midgley, 1989), declines in motivation (Eccles & Midgley, 1989), and negative impacts to self-esteem and self-image (Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Wigfield et al., 1991). Students may also experience increases in disciplinary problems (Theriot & Dupper, 2010) and increases in psychological distress (Chung et al., 1998; Eccles et al., 1993; Elias et al., 1992; Elias et al., 1985).

Many of the noted studies that examined the effects of the transition from elementary school to middle school were conducted during a time period where literature on the middle school model and theories on effective middle school practices were just starting to be commonly accepted and put into practice throughout the country. Research studies conducted more recently illustrate that schools that take into consideration the developmental needs of the young adolescents when developing programs and activities, and when making instructional decisions will often see a positive impact on student achievement and the social-emotional development of the students (Akos & Martin, 2003; Akos et al., 2004; Akos et al., 2007; Anfara et al., 2003; Flowers et al., 2007, 2010; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 2003, 2010). Flowers et al. (2007, 2010) reported increases in student achievement in schools where interdisciplinary teams were effectively used and regular common planning time was utilized to support the needs of the students on the team. Throughout their research on effective teams, these researchers also acknowledged that effective teams build relationships with their students,

contributing to the students' social-emotional development and creating a supportive school culture (Flowers et al., 2007).

Several studies examined the transition to middle school through the perspective of the students experiencing the phenomenon (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Elias et al., 1992). Akos (2002) conducted a four-phase study that involved 331 fifth graders transitioning into the middle school setting. In the first phase of the study, students were asked to generate a list of questions they had about the middle school. This information was utilized to generate a questionnaire, used in phase two, that asked students to select concerns from a list of 13 themes. The same themes were presented for students to examine to identify positive features. The questionnaire also included an open-ended response item. The third phase of the study required students to complete another questionnaire that asked about academic strategies and contained some questions included on the previous survey. The final phase included another questionnaire that repeated previously asked questions, as well as, open-ended response items seeking recommendations to ease the transition of future students. Findings indicated students were initially most concerned with things that were procedural in nature (e.g. finding classrooms, getting lost, learning to open a locker) or related to social interactions (e.g. dealing with older students). As students became acclimated to the routines, concerns remained high regarding social issues but also included more of a focus on academic achievement.

Akos and Galassi (2004) sought to compare the perception of students, parents, and teachers during the transition from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school. The survey instrument used with the students was taken from Akos (2002).

The results, for the middle school participants, again revealed student concerns over the transition experience. The middle school participants consisted of 173 sixth graders from one school. Survey items were based on collecting data that indicated who provided the students information about the school before their arrival, what were the best and most difficult aspects of school, what did the students do to help them adjust to school, what can be done in elementary school to help with the transition, and what can be done by the middle school to help fifth graders be ready for the move to sixth grade. The analysis found three primary areas of concern for students related to the transition: academic, procedural, and social. Students indicated the most concern over the increased amount of school work, getting lost, and getting to class on time. Sixty-six percent of the parents felt it took 4 weeks or less to adjust to middle school, while 28% felt it took longer. Findings also indicated that students felt that to ease the transition, their new school could provide additional support adjusting to the new academic expectations, be welcoming, and be encouraging (p. 6). The study also found that students had positive perceptions about aspects of their middle school including, selecting classes, changing classes, having elective courses, and the social components of school. They concluded that students may adjust faster to procedural aspects of school, but acknowledged that for the students, academic and social issues are equally important. They also noted that an increased sense of belonging may lead to a more positive perception of the middle school experience.

Elias et al. (1992) conducted research using the Survey of Adaptational Tasks-Middle School (SAT-MS), which they developed and experimented with over years to establish instrument validity. Researchers examined 155 sixth grade students' self-assessment of the extent to which a transitional task caused them difficulty or distress.

The study further examined the academic impact and social-emotional impact associated with these transitional tasks. The wording of the SAT-MS required students to “rate the extent to which a given task was a problem for them” (Elias et al., 1992, p. 44). The rating choices were made into concrete selections for the sixth grade participants: not a problem, small problem, medium problem, and large problem. Girls participating in the study reported higher levels of peer-related stress, while boys expressed greater difficulty adapting to environmental and procedural issues.

Diemert (1992) found that half of students’ concerns when transitioning into the middle school were based on social issues, with the remainder focused on procedural and academic issues. In this study, 23 fifth grade students completed a survey where they indicated the extent to which common needs of transitioning students were important to them and whether or not they received assistance with the issue during their transition into their middle school. In addition to social aspects of school being of most concern to both boys and girls, boys indicated the need for additional academic support from teachers to meet the new expectations, and girls felt that they needed additional time for social interaction with their friends from elementary school.

Arowosafe and Irvin (1992) conducted a two-part qualitative study that captured students’ perspectives on the transition to middle school. In the first part, 135 sixth grade students in a Southeastern middle school submitted writing samples where each student was asked to “write about his or her experiences as a sixth grader” (p. 15). The transition into middle school was a repeated theme throughout the student responses. The authors then conducted six individual follow up interviews with students in order to gain a deeper understanding of the students’ perceptions. The study revealed students experienced

concerns over procedural, social and academic issues. The student participants in this study indicated the orientation process, while a positive experience, did not effectively meet their needs and provide them the necessary information that would allow them to feel comfortable in their new environment. Arowosafe and Irvin determined that “students could be better prepared and their transition to middle school eased if a program were created which deliberately enhanced the quality of information disseminated by parents, siblings and peers, and teachers” (p. 18).

Strategies to Support Transitioning Students

Research supports the notion that the transition to middle school is a process, not a one-time event, and the effectiveness of a school’s transition program will directly impact the students’ perceptions of their new learning environment (Akos et al., 2004; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). A comprehensive transition plan takes into consideration the procedural, social-emotional, and academic concerns students express in order to prepare students for the expectations of the middle school and reduce anxieties about moving in to a new learning environment (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Elias, 2001a; Elias, 2001b; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; NMSA, n.d.). Research suggests effective transition programs have multiple activities intended to orient students to their new learning environment (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Mullins & Irvin, 2000; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). Several research studies proposed the school counselor and school administrator visit the upcoming students in their elementary school setting to allow students to begin to develop a feeling of comfort, belonging, and connection while still in a setting that was familiar to them (Akos et al., 2004; Koppang, 2004; Perkins & Gelfner, 1995; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). To further establish

connections, several studies advised middle schools to hold an open house in the spring and in the summer prior to the opening of school (Koppang, 2004; Perkins & Gelfner, 1995; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000).

Flowers et al. (1999, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d) and MacIver and Epstein (1991) recommended small interdisciplinary teams, or smaller learning communities, to support a variety of social-emotional needs, as well as create a more supportive and structured academic environment. Williamson (1993) guided middle school educators to offer information about the start of the new school year, including information on team assignments, lockers, and building procedures as early as possible. Offering this information before students end the previous school year can create a sense of belonging in the new environment more quickly, and may allow students to establish connections with others that are assigned to the same team (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000; Williamson, 1993). Shoffner and Williamson (2000) encouraged teachers to contact the incoming students assigned to their team prior to their arrival by phone or in writing to establish a positive connection before the opening of school. Fields (2002) and Koppang (2004) urged school transition teams to seek the opinions, concerns, and worries of the fifth grade students, and design additional transition programs that address the questions and concerns they raised.

Akos et al. (2007) promoted the use of peer counseling groups and the use of developmental theory to support middle school students peer relations and assist in social skills development. Another way of creating supportive peer groups could be through the use of a buddy system (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000) or the use of advisory programs (Jackson & Davis, 2000; MacIver & Epstein, 1991; Thompson & VanderJagt, 2002).

Social groups can also be developed while students are still in the elementary setting (Akos & Martin, 2003). Within these groups specific topics can be addressed over time, allowing students to be better prepared for the expectations of the middle school. Akos et al. (2004) developed a 3 week orientation program, which began the day the students entered the middle school. The orientation program was designed based upon three areas of need that appeared throughout the literature on transition and based on the results of needs assessment conducted with the students: organizational-procedural needs, personal-social needs, and academic needs. The first week in the school the orientation addressed procedural issues and began to establish a sense of belonging (Akos et al., 2004, p. 46). During the second week, additional school-wide procedures were addressed by school administrators. In the third week, teachers identified students that appeared to need additional support, for academic or social reasons, and created small support groups that were scheduled to meet regularly (Akos et al., 2004, p. 47). Both teachers and students expressed positive feelings about the transition program, particularly about its ability to ease student anxieties and acclimate students to the school more quickly.

Implications

Research has shown that the transition to middle school comes at a developmentally challenging point in the life of a young adolescent. Students transitioning from the elementary to the middle school often suffer negative impacts to their academic performance and self-esteem. However, studies also indicate that in middle schools that consider the developmental needs of the young adolescent and implement strategies with the developmental needs of the children in mind, students can make satisfactory progress and not suffer significant losses in academic achievement or

to their social and emotional development. The research that takes into consideration the perspectives of the students experiencing the transition indicates students experience concern over procedures, social issues, and academics. These areas of concern clearly connect to the theoretical perspectives expressing the need for developmentally responsive middle schools.

It was anticipated that the results of this study would support previous research that found students who are supported and exposed to developmentally responsive programming experience a more positive transition into middle school. The data provided valuable insight from the students' perspectives to the educators of CMS about the effectiveness of the transition programs in place. The feedback allowed educators at the school to gain a clear picture of what they have been doing well to meet the developmental needs of the students while easing their transition into middle school, as well as what needs to change or be improved upon to better meet the needs of the students in transition.

On a larger scale, this study has implications for positive social change in schools that wish to ease the negative effects experienced by many students transitioning into middle school. Middle level educators across the nation will benefit from the detailed description generated based upon the data gathered through student focus groups and anonymous writing samples. This analysis, when shared with middle school educators across the country, will allow the larger population of middle schools to benefit from the insights of the students experiencing the transition to middle school, thereby establishing a positive impact on academic achievement and social-emotional development. Detailed information on how data were gathered is included in Section 2. This description will

provide the necessary tools to other educators who are interested in gaining a deeper understanding of students' perspectives on how well their school is responding to meet its students' developmental needs in order to then reflect on how improvements can be made within the school setting.

The research findings, the description of the perspective of the students on how their developmental needs are being addressed during the transition from elementary to middle school, were used to guide the development of a product that will further support the developmental needs of the young adolescents transitioning into CMS. The development of such a tool is intended to lead to increases in student achievement and support structures that may contribute to positive social-emotional growth, thereby creating a learning community where more students feel safe and comfortable learning.

Conclusion

This case study sought to capture the opinions, thoughts, and perceptions of the young adolescents transitioning from elementary to CMS to gain a clear understanding of how incoming sixth grade students describe the transition process. In capturing their thoughts, attention was also paid to discerning students' perceptions of the transition as it relates to their physical concerns, social-emotional concerns, and intellectual-cognitive development. Research on the middle school model provides evidence for the need for developmentally responsive middle schools. Developmentally responsive schools implement strategies and structures that often lead to a positive school climate, increases in student achievement, and positive social-emotional development in young adolescents. Furthermore, students who transition into developmentally responsive middle schools often experience higher levels of academic achievement and social success.

Section 2 describes the specific qualitative methods and procedures that were used in this case study to collect and analyze data. Throughout section 2, support is provided to justify the choice of research methods and data analysis procedures.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

Section 2 describes the methodology that was used for this case study. The purpose of this case study and the guiding questions are re-introduced. The selection of the qualitative research methods are explained and justified. Following the explanation of methods, is a description of the participants. A detailed description of the data collection process and procedures for analyzing the gathered data is provided. The section also contains findings from the focus group interviews with students, as well as findings from the anonymous writing samples. The culmination of section 2 is a description of the project inspired by the research findings.

Purpose Statement and Guiding Questions

Seven years ago, CMS staff members raised concerns related to students transitioning into the sixth grade from the elementary setting. In particular, many of these students, 20% of the sixth grade class, were frequently referred to the building administration for disciplinary reasons and a high percentage of students, 28%, received one or more failing grade throughout the course of the school year (N. S. R., personal communication, 2005). Over the subsequent years, educators at the school have made a concerted effort to research and infuse best practices for middle level education into daily operations, beginning the transformation process into a developmentally responsive middle school. CMS staff members teaching sixth grade have consciously implemented developmentally appropriate strategies in order to ease the transition from elementary to middle school.

School officials can easily look at computer data and infer that the changes made thus far have had a positive impact on the students. Disciplinary referrals from sixth grade students are down, 10.9% from 21.1%, and student grades are on the rise, 15% of students with one or more failure in a class during the 2008-2009 school year as opposed to 28% in 2004-2005 (L. D. F., personal communication, 2009). In order to paint a realistic picture of the school's efforts thus far and to continue to build upon the positive changes witnessed to date, it is critical to assess what is being done well and explore where improvements can still be made. Only through research that captures the opinions, thoughts, and perceptions of the young people who are experiencing the transition can the success of the school's efforts truly be measured.

Therefore, the purpose of this case study was to capture the opinions, thoughts, and perceptions of the students experiencing the transition into the middle school setting. The goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of the students' perspectives of how CMS addresses their developmental needs as they transition from the elementary school into the middle school setting. Three focus groups, consisting of between six and eight students from each of the three sixth grade teams, were selected to participate in focus group interviews that explored the students' perceptions of the transition process in depth. Additional data were obtained by reviewing anonymous student writing samples completed for the school's transition team. The focus group interviews, coupled with the written responses, allowed the perceptions of the students experiencing the transition to be captured, creating a vivid picture of how students feel their developmental needs are or are not supported throughout their transition into CMS.

The following questions guided the case study:

Focus Question: How do students transitioning from their elementary schools into CMS describe the support, or lack thereof, which they received throughout the transition?

1. How do students describe their feelings about the transition from elementary to CMS?
2. How do students perceive their physical needs or concerns are or are not supported?
3. How do students perceive their social-emotional needs or concerns are or are not supported?
4. How do students perceive their intellectual-cognitive needs or concerns are or are not supported?
5. When evaluating the current transition programs in place at CMS, what do students describe as strengths and/or areas for improvement?

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

Qualitative Case Study

Action research encourages educators to focus on problems, issues, or concerns in their local situations that require improvement (Elliot, as cited in Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003). Educators who engage in action research or project based research “play a part in the research process, which makes them more likely to facilitate change based on the knowledge they create” (Carr & Kemmis, as cited in Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003, p. 4). Throughout this case study, I took an active role researching the transition from the elementary setting into CMS. As the school’s assistant principal, I am not only in a

position to simply collect data but to later use that data to facilitate changes to programs and structures in the school that will lead to improvements benefiting future students that transition into CMS.

Qualitative methods were selected for this case study because it was the goal of this research “to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences” (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). Qualitative research studies are people-oriented, designed to capture what people actually say, feel, and experience (Patton, 2002).

Gillham (2000) contended that qualitative studies are appropriate for those researchers who seek to understand how or why something is what it is, or thinks, and feels the way it does. Furthermore, Creswell (2007) stated that qualitative research is needed when the goal is “to study a group or population, identify variables that can be measured, or hear silenced voices” (p. 40). Students’ concerns, opinions, and thoughts are often silenced. Their insights often overlooked. Research studies frequently use statistics or other stakeholder perspectives to examine or explain the experiences students encounter. Van Kaam (as cited in Moustakas, 1994), stated that the use of quantitative methods and “experimental design imposed on the ‘subjects’ of an experiment, and statistical methods, ‘may distort rather than disclose a given behavior through an imposition of restricted theoretical constructs on the full meaning and richness of human behavior’” (p. 14). Qualitative methods were appropriate for this study in order to vividly describe the perspectives and experiences of the students transitioning from elementary into CMS.

The inspiration for design of the current study was found in the qualitative research of Arowosafe and Irvin (1992). Their study was completed in two parts. The first portion of the research involved 135 sixth grade students in a Southeastern middle

school who submitted writing samples within which each student was asked to “write about his or her experiences as a sixth grader” (p. 15). The transition into middle school was a repeated theme throughout the student responses. The authors then conducted six follow up interviews with individual students in order to gain a deeper understanding of the students’ perceptions. Although the goal of the current research study was not to duplicate the methodology of Arowosafe and Irvin, their study did serve as inspiration for this study’s methodological development.

Case Study Research Methods

Qualitative researchers commonly accept the following as approaches for conducting qualitative research: narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory research, ethnographic research, and case study research (Creswell, 2003, 2007; Hatch, 2000; Merriam, 2002). According to Creswell (2007), a narrative study is best for “capturing the detailed stories of life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals” (p. 55). The purpose of the current study was to gain an understanding of the transition from the perspective of multiple people; therefore, a narrative study was not appropriate for this project study. Merriam (2002) described phenomenological research as that which “seeks to understand the essence or structure of a phenomenon” (p. 93). Giorgi, as cited in Moustakas (1994), explained that the aim in phenomenological research is to gain an understanding of what an experience means for the people who have had the experience, and then create a comprehensive and vivid description of that experience (p. 13). A phenomenological approach would not be appropriate for this project study because the study focuses on one specific case rather than on the larger population of students transitioning into multiple middle schools.

Grounded theory is meant to “generate or discover a theory” (Creswell, 2007, p. 63). Since this project study did not seek to establish a theory, grounded theory was not an appropriate method. Ethnographers study the meaning behind behaviors within a culture. This type of research often involves the researcher observing the culture and drawing conclusions based on the observations. In this research study, the goal was not to understand the meaning behind the behaviors, but to gain an understanding from the students’ perspective of how CMS does or does not support the developmental needs of the students as they transition into middle school.

Case studies look in depth at specific individuals, groups, or programs within the site being studied (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). “Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data ... and reports a case description and case based themes” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). The goal of this research study was to examine the transition into CMS through the eyes of the students who have recently experienced the transition.

Stake (1995) identifies a single instrument case study as one where the researcher is interested in a particular area of concern within a bounded case. The current research study was bound to one middle school, CMS, in the northeast region of the United States. Data were collected during the 2010-2011 school year. Within this single bounded case, there was one specific issue of interest: the incoming sixth grade students’ perceptions of how the school does or does not support their developmental needs as they transition from elementary school into CMS. CMS can also be described as a representative or

typical case (Yin, 2009) as its structure, procedures, programs, and practices are representative of many other middle schools in the northeast region of the United States.

Gillham (2000), Creswell (2007), and Yin (2009) identified several traditional techniques for obtaining data from participants in case study research. These include, but are not limited to, observations, individual interviews, focus group interviews, document and record analysis, written responses, work samples. In this case study, data were gathered through three different focus group interviews and by reviewing anonymous student writing samples.

The entire population of sixth grade students for the 2010-2011 school year at CMS was invited to complete an anonymous, open-ended writing sample in late March, early April to provide feedback to the school's transition team as they began preparations for the fifth to sixth grade orientation programs. The writing samples allowed all sixth grade students the opportunity to offer their perceptions of the transition process into CMS. Copies of these documents were provided for use in this research study. Focus group interviews were also conducted with three different groups of students in mid-April. The goal of the focus group sessions was to obtain a more comprehensive depiction of students' perceptions of the transition process with regard to how their school supports their developmental needs. Capturing students' thoughts and opinions about the transition to CMS was timely since all data were collected during their sixth grade year. Some reflective questions were incorporated into the interview guide for the focus group sessions to allow the students the opportunity to provide feedback that could be utilized with future classes transitioning into the school.

Participants

In a case study, the selection of a case “is done purposefully, not randomly; that is, a particular person, site, program, process, community, or other bounded system is selected because it exhibits characteristics of interest to the researcher” (Merriam, 2002, p. 179). CMS was purposefully selected as the focus of this study. As an educator and administrator at CMS, it is important for me to receive feedback from the students in order to ensure their developmental needs are adequately met as they transition from the elementary setting. The statistics reviewed during the summer planning meetings over the past few years indicated increases in student achievement and diminishing disciplinary referrals. However, missing from the computer-driven data were the opinions, thoughts, and perspectives of the sixth graders themselves. Collecting information from the sixth grade students directly impacted by the transition process provided rich data that illustrated the support, or lack thereof, provided by CMS throughout the transition process.

School Demographics and Information

The students selected to participate in this study attended CMS, a Grade 6, 7, and 8 middle school in the northeast region of the United States. The school is one of four middle schools in a large suburban district. CMS has a population of nearly 900 students, with approximately 300 in each grade level. Historically, the school has experienced a transient population, with 5-10% of students moving in and out annually. The demographic make-up of the school community, according to information from the school’s state report card, consists of 41.5% White, 33.6% Asian or Pacific Islander, 13.1% Hispanic, and 11.6% Black (State Department of Education, 2009). Assessment

data for the 2008-2009 school year indicated 85.8% of the school population deemed proficient on the Language Arts Literacy portion of the state assessment and 81.5% deemed proficient on the math assessment (State Department of Education, 2009).

Academically, the school was identified as a SINI school 6 years ago. From 2006 through 2009, CMS achieved AYP goals and was, therefore, no longer deemed a SINI school. In the 2009-2010 school year, CMS's state assessment data revealed one subgroup in need of improvement, resulting in the school being labeled a SINI school once again (State Department of Education, 2010).

Students transition into CMS from five elementary schools. Three schools contribute most of the students, while only a handful of students come from the other two locations. Upon entering the school, students are randomly assigned to three interdisciplinary teams of approximately 100 students each. There are three teams at each grade level in the school: Wizards, Stars, and Magic (pseudonyms). Every effort is made to maintain pure teams, where students are assigned classes only on their team. An attempt is also made to maintain the students' team assignment from one year to the next, so when a student is assigned to the Stars in sixth grade, the student will remain a Star throughout middle school. The students assigned to the team share the same core academic teachers. In the sixth grade, there are two English, one math, one science, and one social studies teacher assigned to each team. The school does not currently implement looping. The interdisciplinary team of teachers is provided one period, 46 minutes, of common planning time daily, referred to at CMS as team time. Team time is set aside for staff members to discuss student concerns and team related business. Over the past few years, the use of PLC protocols has contributed to the teams' ability to focus

on student achievement outcomes. Teams have focused PLC discussions on instructional practices, use of formative and summative assessment, coordination of curriculum and assignments, planning interdisciplinary lessons and units, planning team activities and extension events, and developing ISPs to assist struggling learners. The staff is also provided one period of personal preparation time daily. The two periods have been scheduled back-to-back in a block in order to create a 92 minute block of time for staff members to collaborate.

All of the students in the sixth grade are assigned the same guidance counselor. The counselor meets with students on a regular basis and remains their counselor for the 3 years of middle school. The counselor also works closely with all three teams of teachers to assist them in addressing student concerns and maintaining open communication with parents. The counselor has a designated meeting day with each of the teams to allow a set, regular time for the counselor to meet with the teachers. The school has two administrators, a principal and an assistant principal. I currently serve as the building's assistant principal, and have since the 2004-2005 school year.

Approvals were obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (approval # 03-07-11-0057339) and permission to conduct the study was granted from the Office of the Superintendent. The Superintendent was provided a letter explaining the study (see Appendix B) and a complete copy of the research proposal. A meeting was held to discuss the parameters of the study and its potential impact on the school community. Once permission was granted from the Superintendent's Office to conduct the study, the principal of CMS was provided a letter explaining the project study and a synopsis of the study (see Appendix C). The principal of CMS provided a letter granting his permission

for the study to be conducted. He was also asked to sign a data use agreement, allowing me the ability to access student information, including orientation attendance roster and student discipline list, in order to generate a list of potential participants and to obtain de-identified copies of the student writing samples used by the transition team. The principal was offered a full copy of the project study proposal.

Student Participants

Since the goal of the study was to gain an understanding of how students transitioning from elementary school into CMS perceived how the school supports their developmental needs throughout the transition, the individuals selected to participate in the study needed to be experiencing the phenomenon. Thus, students transitioning from elementary school into sixth grade at CMS during the 2010-2011 school year were the participants of this case study.

A “typical case sample” of sixth graders was desired (Hatch, 2002, p. 98). Hatch described these as “individuals who represent what is considered typical” (p. 98) in a particular group. Since the students at CMS were organized into three interdisciplinary teams, one focus group from each team was selected to participate in an interview in order to obtain a cross-section of perceptions from students on the Wizards, Stars, and Magic. Because the three teams each conducted a separate summer orientation that may have had subtle differences leading to variations in perceptions and experiences, having students participate in focus group interviews with their team members was intended to create a level of shared experience and added familiarity within the group, adding to the depth of the discussion.

Hatch (2002) recommended maintaining a group size of 6-12 participants when conducting focus group interviews, while Krueger and Casey (2008) recommended between 5 and 10 participants. “The idea is to have enough individuals to generate and maintain a discussion but not so many that some individuals will have a hard time getting the floor” (Hatch, 2002, p. 135). Each of the three sixth grade teams, Wizards, Stars, and Magic, had just under 100 students that were randomly assigned by the school scheduling software. Within each team, focus groups of between six and nine students were sought to participate in interviews, resulting in 18-27 total sixth grade focus group participants.

To select potential participants, rosters were obtained from the school indicating the names of all students that were present for the school’s three different orientation programs: (a) the sixth grade guidance counselor and my visit to the elementary school in May, (b) the elementary school trip to CMS in May, and (c) the team orientation conducted in August. Another roster was obtained that indicated the names of all sixth grade students who accumulated any disciplinary infractions since September. These students were excluded from the selection process. The rosters were then separated by interdisciplinary team. In an effort to obtain a sample representative of the student population and avoid the possibility of favoritism, students were then selected from the rosters through a systematic process. The number nine was randomly chosen and then every ninth person was selected from the list as a potential participant. Additional names were selected to generate a back-up list in the event that not enough potential participants showed an interest in being a part of the study.

Since the maximum desired number of participants from each team was nine, nine students from each group were invited to participate in the interview process. Potential

participants were visited during lunch and were provided copies of parental consent and student assent letters to review with their parents. The letters explained the purpose and parameters of this case study, as well as provided information on how to contact me (see Appendix D and Appendix E). By delivering the letters to the students I was able to verbally explain the contents of the letters and answer questions students they had before they brought the information home to their parents.

Parents of potential participants were provided a letter requesting consent for student participation (see Appendix D). Students also received student assent information (see Appendix E). All students and parents interested in participating returned completed forms to the school's main office by the date designated on the forms. In the end, 20 total students agreed to participate in the focus group sessions: six students from the Wizard team, eight students from the Stars team, and six students from the Magic team. Because the minimum number of desired participants from each team was six, it was unnecessary to utilize the back-up list.

In addition to focus group interviews, data were obtained by reviewing anonymous writing samples originally completed for the school's transition team. All sixth graders attending CMS, approximately 260 for the 2010-2011 school year, were invited to submit responses to an anonymous writing sample that asked students for their feedback about the transition from elementary to the middle school. In order to obtain maximum information about the phenomenon being examined, it is important to receive a variety of perspectives from those individuals experiencing the phenomenon (Hatch, 2002). Therefore, I requested access to these writing samples to use as a data source for

this research study. In total, 209 responses were provided as a data source for this research study, accounting for 79.7% of the sixth grade population.

The sixth grade teachers play a very important role in the lives of their students. In order to keep them informed about the role some of their students were asked to play in the research study and allow them the opportunity to either answer questions, or point students or parents in the direction where their questions can be answered, an informational letter was designed that provided teachers with information about the study's purpose and procedures (see Appendix H). The teachers were provided this letter prior to the students receiving the invitation to participate. Because participation in the focus group sessions required students to be absent from an elective or physical education class to participate, a letter of cooperation and list of potential participants was sent out to all elective and physical education teachers. Teachers were asked to sign and return the letter of cooperation (see Appendix I), and were provided the opportunity to voice any concerns about particular students missing class to participate in the interview process. The teachers fully supported the process and allowed all students selected as potential participants the opportunity to participate.

Ethical Considerations for Participants

The American Psychological Association (APA) standards for research conducted with human participants stated it is necessary for researchers to “take reasonable steps to implement appropriate protections for the rights and welfare of human participants” (APA, 2001, p. 390). Care was taken throughout the stages of research to protect the participants and maintain their confidentiality.

Within a case study, the APA (2010) described two methods of maintaining confidentiality without adulterating the data collected. The first method involves preparing the descriptive material and then presenting it to the subject in order to obtain his/her consent to publish. Because the subjects of this case study are students and their identities must be maintained as confidential, this is not an appropriate method for this study. The second method includes “disguising some aspects of the case material so neither the subject nor third parties are identifiable” (APA, 2010, p. 17). In this study, the name of the school has been changed and its location generalized to the northeast region of the United States. Additionally, pseudonyms have been assigned to the school’s three interdisciplinary teams. It is with confidentiality in mind that the letter from the superintendent giving his approval of the study, the letter from CMS’s principal giving his approval for the study to be conducted, and the signed data use agreement forms have not been included in the final document.

The school agreed to provide copies of anonymous student writing samples, which were originally issued by the school’s transition team as a tool to help them prepare for the upcoming student orientations. Students were instructed not to include their names on any component of the written response. They were also instructed not to refer to their friends or family members by their real names. The school reviewed the responses prior to releasing them to me, in order to ensure there were no student identifiers within the documents. Due to the full anonymity of the responses, there is no threat to student safety.

It is recognized that as the researcher and assistant principal, I hold a position that could be the source of concern for some regarding the protection of the young people

participating in the focus group portion of the study. Beginning in May of the students' fifth grade year, I begin to develop a rapport with the incoming students. By visiting the elementary schools with the guidance counselor in May, I begin to establish myself as someone the students can approach with questions or concerns. Through the August orientation, in which I play a key role, I continue to build a level of trust and respect amongst the students, showing them that I am interested in their lives on a variety of levels. As the school year begins, students see me daily during lunch, in the halls, and in their classrooms. Many students are comfortable approaching me because of these efforts. In order to eliminate any concerns that could have surfaced as a result of including students that were referred to me for disciplinary reasons, these students were excluded from the student rosters prior to selecting potential participants for the focus group interviews.

Although participants were encouraged to speak freely and offer all opinions, as the school's assistant principal I assumed that some of the students may not offer genuine opinions because they were seeking to please their new administrator. I further assumed that some may have been uncomfortable sharing with me simply because of my position. Another assumption made was that some students may have experienced concern for what their peers thought of their real opinions, or concern for appearing unintelligent. By participating in an interview setting with their teammates, I hoped it would be an added source of comfort for some students. Throughout the course of the school year, sixth grade teachers at CMS spend a significant amount of time developing a sense of team pride and respect amongst team members. During the initial portion of the 46 minute focus group session, time was built in for students to introduce themselves and establish a

level of comfort within the group. This included establishing working agreements that fostered respect for all opinions offered throughout the session. It was important that the students understood that their genuine feelings were the focus of the case study and sharing them was critical to affect changes in their new school setting. Careful monitoring of the group discussion allowed all interested students the opportunity to share their perceptions, prevented any one individual from dominating the session, and ensured no one was belittled for their thoughts or feelings.

The benefits from participating in this research study included the possibility of developing a more effective and supportive transition program for future students transitioning into CMS. Participating in a focus group interview with peers may have presented a risk for some students where other participants could tease, ridicule, or spread information beyond the focus group session. The establishment of working agreements and the participation agreement, which emphasized the confidentiality of others, were put in place in an effort to minimize the possible risks of participation in this study (see Appendix K). Each participant and his or her parents were informed of the implications of involvement in the study within the student assent and parent consent forms (see Appendix D and Appendix E). Consent form content was repeated prior to the start of each focus group interview, with an emphasis on the need to maintain a level of confidentiality for all participants. Parents were required to sign the consent form in order for students to participate in the focus groups because of the students' ages (see Appendix D). Students interested in participating were also asked to sign an assent form after reviewing the information with his or her parent (see Appendix E). As participants, it was important that the students had a clear understanding of what they were expected to do.

Since the focus of this study was to gain a clear understanding of their perceptions of how the school did or did not support their developmental needs during the transition from elementary to CMS, having the students participate with their parents in the application process showed them from the initial stages of the study that their thoughts, feelings, and opinions were the focus of the study. It was clearly stated to the students and their parents in the initial letter seeking participants and verbally prior to the start of the interview that they may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. Students were also informed that the only reason I would need to break the confidentiality agreement is if they shared something that was potentially harmful to themselves or others.

In order to protect students' confidentiality in data gathered through focus group interviews, interviews were audio-recorded rather than video-taped. When the interviews were transcribed, student names were omitted; students were referred to only by a previously assigned number. Parents and students were made aware of provisions for confidentiality with audio-taping on the written consent to participate form (see Appendix D and Appendix E). These steps to ensure confidentiality were again reviewed with the students at the beginning of each group session. Transcripts of recorded focus group interviews and copies of the student writing samples will be maintained in a file box in my home and destroyed 5 years following the conclusion of the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collected through three separate focus group interviews and anonymous student writing samples were analyzed and interpreted to create a clear description of how the sixth grade students of CMS describe how their developmental needs were or were not being supported throughout the transition into middle school.

Focus Group Interviews

The purpose of the study was to elicit the opinions, thoughts, and perceptions of students transitioning into sixth grade; therefore, selected participants were in their sixth grade year at CMS at the time focus group interviews were conducted. Krueger and Casey (2008) identified the purpose of focus groups as part of program development.

They stated focus groups are often utilized in order to

gain an understanding – to see the issue...through the eyes and hearts of the target audience. The goal with these focus groups is to learn how a target audience sees, understands and values a particular topic and to learn the language used to talk about the topic. (pp. 8-9)

Focus groups are also important to gain information on the evaluation of programs once they are in place in order to learn what is being done well and where improvements may be needed (Krueger & Casey, 2008). The focus group, as a data collection tool, combines elements of the individual interview and participant observations (Janesick, 2004). Therefore, by creating an informal setting where participants have the opportunity to speak freely about the topic of interest and feel comfortable doing so, the researcher can obtain valuable data. Janesick (2004) urged facilitators of focus groups to create conditions that will generate participants' enthusiasm and interest to productively address issues (p. 71). Janesick (2004) also identified focus group interviews as a good tool for use to gather information from participants when there is a "power differential" (p. 81). In this case, the participants were sixth grade students in the school where I serve as the assistant principal.

When conducting focus group interviews, the goal is to have enough people to generate a strong discussion but not so many people that the conversation becomes unwieldy. The focus group interview was selected within this project study as a “vehicle for collecting the talk and thoughts of children in the classroom” (Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003, p. 74). Dana and Yendol-Silva (2003) further stated that focus groups have the ability to “serve as a tool for understanding students’ perceptions” (p. 75).

Focus group interviews were conducted on three different dates in mid-April of the 2010-2011 school year. The focus groups met during the students’ physical education or elective period, the equivalent of one 46 minute class period. Three separate focus group interviews, one for each of the school’s interdisciplinary teams, were conducted. When establishing the methodology for the study, I took into consideration that the approaches used by the three teams to orient the new sixth grade students varies slightly; therefore, conducting interviews with students that are on the same team allowed the students to have a level of shared experience and understanding of team procedures and processes. I also felt that the students would have a greater sense of familiarity with one another, as the teams spend a great deal of time conducting team building activities that allow the students to develop a feeling of belonging.

There were 27 total students invited to participate in the study, nine from each team. In the end 20 students accepted the invitation: six Wizards, eight Stars, and six Magic. Students received passes during homeroom on the day of their interview, reminding them to report to the main lobby at the end of their period 5 class (see Appendix I). Once all students arrived, they were escorted to the school’s conference room. With each group that entered the conference room, several students commented on

feeling important because they were in this location, an area typically reserved for adults to meet. The conference room has large, cushioned, upholstered chairs on wheels that have a lever that allows the height to be adjusted. The students eagerly sat, and immediately began playing with the lever to adjust their chairs, laughing with one another about the chairs being fun. This initial bit of fun served as an ice-breaker of sorts, allowing the students the opportunity to immediately develop a level of comfort with one another and the situation.

As the facilitator of each focus group, I began with introduction activities: welcome, explain procedures, review consents, and offer opportunity for question and answers. I then established the group's working agreements, which included maintaining respect for each member's thoughts and that all opinions stayed amongst the group. Initial guiding questions were developed to help structure the session and focus on obtaining data relevant to the research questions (see Appendix F). The focus group interview guide was developed based on the research questions for this study and questions posed to students in previously conducted research studies that examined students' perception of the transition into middle school (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Midgley & Urdan, 1992). Although the desire was for the conversation to develop a natural flow, it was imperative to gather as much information as possible during the focus group discussions in order to develop a clear understanding of how the students described their transition into middle school; therefore, focus and attention to the interview guide was maintained throughout each session.

Throughout the discussion, I served as the facilitator, encouraging discussion but remaining neutral on issues. When necessary, I probed for clarity or deeper understanding

of comments offered by the participants using phrases suggested by Rubin & Rubin (2005) such as “give us an example of...” or “tell us more about that.”

As I hoped, the students in each group knew each other well because of the shared classes and the work of the grade level team to create a sense of belonging. When conducting the welcome, all of the students stated that they knew one another from classes. Throughout the interviews, all of the students were very respectful of one another. They were conscious about allowing their peers the opportunity to present an entire idea without being interrupted. They took turns sharing thoughts, making sure that anyone who wanted to offer feedback was given the opportunity to share. Throughout the interview process, the overwhelming majority of students seemed comfortable contributing their thoughts and opinions. To provide an initial response to each question, students went around the table offering their opinions on the topic or opting to pass. After all students had the opportunity to share, students were then given the chance to provide additional commentary at will. Students raised their hands to indicate they had something to contribute, waited for the person before them to finish speaking, and then proceeded to offer their insights. Before moving on to another item, students were able to offer final thoughts on the question. By moderating the group in this manner, I could ensure that no one person monopolized the floor. Throughout the process, students were respectful of one another, polite and appropriate in their interactions. When disagreeing with someone’s opinion, students phrased their responses gently, giving me the impression that they did not wish to offend or hurt the feelings of the person with whom they were disagreeing.

Another assumption I made when preparing for the interviews was that my role as the assistant principal might cause some of the students to be hesitant to share genuine feelings. Because of the process used to select potential participants, I only knew one student of the 20 by name prior to the interview sessions. The introduction process allowed the students to gain a better understanding about my research project and their role in it. Throughout the session, students offered insights that illustrated both positive and negative experiences. Based on the interactions of the students and the candor of their responses, I do believe that the students offered their genuine feelings throughout the process.

Patton (2002) recommended that when working with students, it is often helpful to have some of the questions written out in order to stimulate discussion. With this in mind, each question was written on easel paper and posted for students to see. This technique allowed students to stay focused on the specific question at hand. Posting the question also resulted in additional discussion time that may have otherwise been lost to unnecessarily having to repeat the question. As students provided responses to each item, I recorded their responses on the chart paper. This process allowed the students to see their responses, and allowed me the opportunity to verify that I captured their thoughts as intended. Affording students the opportunity to see what they just stated was valuable for validating the data.

Taking into consideration that many sixth grade students are concrete thinkers, the second question on the interview guide provided students a list of items that are typically of concern for students transitioning into middle school or elements of middle school that require adjustment time. The list of items was similar to those presented on the Survey of

Adaptational Tasks - Middle School, SAT-MS (Elias et al., 1992). For this item, students were asked to place stickers next to five different aspects of transition. They were then asked to describe one in detail. The same process was followed, asking students to identify aspects of the transition that are typically easy for students to adjust to. It was anticipated that this portion of the focus group interview would lead to deep discussion on elements of the transition where students felt well supported and areas where more support was needed. The question itself was worded as a generalization to any middle school student. The generalization was done purposely to reduce the potential sensitivity or discomfort that could occur if students were asked to reflect on personal experiences or those of their friends.

In addition to probing for clarity, it was also necessary to encourage dissenting opinions. By asking students questions such as, “does anyone have a different opinion or perspective on that” or “do you have another viewpoint you’d like to present,” students were encouraged to offer multiple perspectives to the questions being answered (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). These types of questions allowed students to feel that their opinions, whether popular or not, were valued.

At the end of the session, I thanked the participants and offered them the opportunity to ask any additional questions before leaving the session. I reminded participants of the agreement to maintain confidentiality once they left the room and where they could find me, or their guidance counselor, in the event they needed to further discuss something that was discussed during the interview process. Several students did approach me in the days following the interviews noting that they enjoyed the experience,

and asked if we could “do it again.” Several of the students also offered to assist at the upcoming spring and summer orientation sessions.

Each focus group meeting was audio-recorded and transcribed. Each student was assigned a number and referred to by that number in the transcriptions. To begin each focus group session, each participant was asked to read a short statement that included his or her number. Allowing the participant to read a short statement allowed the voice to be more discernible during transcription. The transcripts refer to participants only by their assigned number. Notes were also taken during the interview process. The purpose of these notes was to allow me the opportunity to reflect on my observations of the students throughout the interview sessions. In addition to the student responses written on the chart paper, brief notes were recorded reflective of body language, non-verbal cues, tone of voice or facial expressions, reactions to questions or comments, and level of individual participation and interest.

Anonymous Writing Samples

All sixth graders attending CMS, approximately 260 students, were invited by the school’s transition team to complete an anonymous writing sample (see Appendix G). The writing sample allowed students to describe their experiences and their perceptions of the transition into CMS by completing five open-ended response items. The first item required students to provide a brief description telling a fifth grade student what to expect during the move to middle school. Students were given nine lines to describe one or two, positive or negative, experiences and six lines to describe feelings experienced. The second item focused on the differences between elementary and middle school, requiring students to reflect on and list up to five aspects of the transition that were challenging or

concerning to them before school started. They were then provided space to write a sentence describing how the challenges were resolved, when and by whom. This question also afforded students the opportunity to give feedback on what else could have been done to help them deal with these aspects of the transition. The third item asked students to provide feedback on their three formal orientation programs. They were asked to list up to five ways the programs positively affected their transition, and then give suggestions that would improve the different programs. Item four asked students to summarize in one sentence what every fifth grader should know about coming to middle school. The final item provided students with space to write anything else they wanted to share about their transition to CMS.

The transition team used student responses in order to begin preparing for the spring orientation programs. The transition team felt that to obtain as many responses as possible, it was necessary for students to complete the writing task during school hours. Therefore, they decided students would be provided time during their social studies classes. Teachers agreed on a 2 week block of time within which they had the flexibility to choose when to administer the task. Once writing tasks were complete, the teachers returned them to the head guidance counselor.

The school principal signed a data release form, agreeing to provide copies of de-identified student responses to me for use in this research study. School officials reviewed student responses prior releasing the documents to me in order to ensure there were no student identifiers within the writing samples. All responses were hand written by students. The content of the responses varied greatly. Some students created bulleted lists, while others wrote paragraphs with clear details to support their thoughts. The

majority of the students responded with two or three sentences for items requiring descriptions. Nearly all students took advantage of the final item to reinforce or expand upon something they referred to in a previous question.

The open-ended response writing task was a familiar format for the students at CMS. This format allowed students to share their opinions anonymously on issues that directly impacted them, while providing the transition team information that would assist them as they prepared for their upcoming fifth to sixth grade orientation programs. A disadvantage to the writing sample format was the inability to probe students for clarity or deeper understanding of their response. For this reason, focus group interviews were conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of students' thoughts and perceptions of the transition into CMS. Other disadvantages to the writing sample were the varying writing skill levels of the individuals writing the responses, and the concise language students tended to utilize when writing for something other than a graded class assessment.

Role of the Researcher

I currently serve as the assistant principal at CMS, and have served in this capacity since the 2004-2005 school year. Throughout my tenure in the school, I have established a positive working relationship with staff and a positive reputation with the families in the school community. I have played an instrumental role in assisting teams at all grade levels refine their roles and responsibilities to better meet the needs of the students on the teams. I have encouraged the incorporation of developmentally appropriate strategies to ease the transition from elementary to middle school.

As a middle school educator, I support the philosophies presented within the middle school model. I agree with the school of thought that if students' developmental needs are being actively supported, they will be more likely to succeed in middle school. When I arrived to CMS in 2004, it quickly became apparent to me that the 1 day orientation in place for fifth graders was insufficient. After the visit, students did not understand the processes and procedures of CMS any better than before they came. As the assistant principal of CMS, I saw it as my responsibility to improve the quality of the transition programs that were in place.

In subsequent years, I have worked with the guidance counselors and teachers to refine and redevelop programs in an effort to effectively acclimate the students to the processes, procedures, and expectations at CMS. I have taken an active role interacting with incoming sixth graders, visiting them at their elementary school in May where the guidance counselor and I discussed important things to know about the first days of school. During the summer orientations, I presented detailed information pertaining to building processes and procedures because I felt that if students understood and felt comfortable in their physical environment, they could focus on their academics. Before conducting this research study, it appeared that the changes made throughout CMS to consciously support the developmental needs of the students and the changes made to the transition programs were having a positive impact on student achievement and school climate in general. When developing my focus for this research study, I saw the need to solicit feedback from the students, rather than rely solely on gut feelings and computer data, in order to confirm that my perceptions that the changes made over time to

programs and processes have resulted in a majority of students feeling that CMS effectively supports their developmental needs.

Throughout the focus group interviews, I chose to serve as the main moderator. Hatch (2000) noted that when the researcher serves as the moderator of focus groups “knowing the subject well and having a good idea of what kinds of data will be useful can be positive attributes of researchers as moderators” (p. 136).

Researchers often recognize that using students as participants in a study may create a situation where “students are especially vulnerable to exploitation because of their youth and their positioning as a kind of captive audience in the school” (Hatch, 2000, p. 67). I recognize that my position as the assistant principal of CMS established a relationship which could have biased the data collection. Multiple measures were taken, as outlined in previous sections, to ensure that the data collected were valid while protecting and maintaining the confidentiality of the children at all times. The safety and security of the students is of paramount importance to me, whether in the role as their assistant principal or as the researcher of this study. Over the years, my desire and interest to continually make improvements within the school to benefit the students has been clearly established within the school community. Also, parents and community members have developed a level of trust in the fact that decisions and programs are implemented with the best interest of the students in mind.

Data Analysis Procedures

Hatch (2002) explained that “data analysis starts by dividing the overall data set into categories or groups based on predetermined typologies. Typologies are generated from theory, common sense, and/or research objectives, and initial data happens within

those typological groupings” (p. 125). Based on the theories behind the middle school model, and the overarching research questions for the study, the data were examined with specific categories in mind. The literature on adolescent development and the middle school model, as reviewed in the previous section, commonly describes the characteristics of young adolescents in three general categories: physical development, social-emotional development, and intellectual-cognitive development. To remain consistent with the existing research and the organizational pattern established in the literature review, these three typologies were utilized to begin organizing data during analysis. These typologies were initially defined as follows: (a) physical aspects refer to elements of the transition that relate to procedural concerns or the actual physical development of the students, (b) social-emotional aspects refer to areas that impact students’ social and emotional development or well-being, including interactions with peers, interactions with adults, establishing a sense of belonging, making and sustaining friendships, interacting with older students, and (c) intellectual-cognitive aspects refer to academic areas of concern, including school work, academic expectations, academic support, achievement, and instructional practices used by staff to facilitate learning.

Hatch (2000) identified nine steps in typological analysis. The following nine steps were followed when analyzing the data gathered via focus groups and writing samples:

1. Identify typologies to be analyzed.
2. Read the data, marking entries related to your typologies.
3. Read entries by typology, recording the main ideas in entries on a summary sheet.

4. Look for patterns, relationships, themes within typologies.
5. Read data, coding entries according to patterns identified and keeping a record of what entries go with which elements of your pattern.
6. Decide if your patterns are supported by data, and search for nonexamples of your patterns.
7. Look for relationships among the patterns identified.
8. Write your patterns as one-sentence generalizations.
9. Select data excerpts that support your generalizations. (p. 153)

All data gathered were manipulated by hand and basic word processing software.

Data analysis began immediately upon the transcription of focus group interviews and receipt of writing samples. In other words, analysis of data occurred upon receipt, simultaneously, and continuously. Because the data collected from focus groups and writing tasks were in written form, I was able to go back and forth between the interview scripts and the writing tasks to critically examine information as patterns developed or individual comments stood out.

Rubin and Rubin (2005) stated that interview transcripts should be examined by the researcher with the goal of “stitching” responses together in order to construct answers to the research questions. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended transcribing soon after interviews to avoid data from becoming distorted by the researcher’s memory. With this in mind, I transcribed all focus group interviews soon after each interview session. Before taking notes or coding, I read and re-read each transcript.

Analysis of focus group transcripts then followed Hatch's (2000) steps for typological analysis as outlined above. During coding, I highlighted and color-coded information by theme as recommended in Moustakas (1994), printing four copies of each individual transcript. Each individual copy was used to analyze data for information within each of the typologies: physical, social-emotional, and intellectual-cognitive needs. The fourth print out was used to look for other ideas that may have required consideration of a different category. Rubin and Rubin (2005) pointed out "coding allows you later on to quickly locate excerpts from the interviews...that refer to the same concept, theme, event or topical marker" (p. 219). The color-coding of text assisted in the ability to present a rich, detailed, and organized depiction of the students' perceptions. Bernard and Ryan (2010) suggested researchers also manipulate data by "cutting and sorting" and creating "word lists" (pp. 63-65). Quotes and expressions were identified and arranged into similar categories. By creating a word list, unique words and phrases were identified that assisted in developing or supporting themes.

Open-ended writing samples were read and re-read an item at a time. I looked for patterns and sorted data by typologies, following the same procedures as used during the manipulation of group interview transcripts. The writing samples, when analyzed, were initially broken down by team and by gender to determine if any pattern specific to a team or gender existed. The writing task and focus group data were also compared to identify similarities or differences between student perspectives presented through the two different data collection methods.

Taking into consideration the typological groupings utilized in the analysis of both data sets, the information was ultimately merged together to generate a collection of

statements that connect to the typologies proposed. As data were read, sorted, coded, re-read, and re-coded, it was anticipated that some data would not fit within the proposed categories. Hatch (2000) suggested dealing with this discrepant data by making a judgment about whether the data collected fits the categories, or there were additional insights within the discrepant data to support examining new categories and making adjustments to original arguments (p. 157). As the data in this case study were manipulated, patterns emerged. Examples and information that appeared to not fit within the typological categories or general findings are reported accordingly.

Validation

According to Merriam (2002), the reality of a phenomenon being studied through qualitative research methods is developed as a result of the researcher's interpretation of the data gathered. In qualitative research, the researcher is closer to the phenomenon being studied than in quantitative research because interpretations are based upon direct observations of the phenomenon of interest rather than statistics obtained through an "instrument with predefined variables" (Merriam, 2002, p. 25). Because the goal was to understand the reality of the students transitioning into CMS, it was important to ensure that my interpretations of the data accurately reflected their reality. Therefore, several strategies were utilized for validation of the research and data gathered. These strategies included:

1. *Member checking* – Data gathered during focus group interviews was reiterated and written for students to review throughout the interview process to ensure the students' intended meaning was captured and to determine whether these participants felt that the interpretations were accurate (Creswell, 2003).

2. *Rich, thick description* – A detailed description is provided in the final report of this case study. It allows readers the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of how the students transitioning into CMS feel their developmental needs were or were not being supported throughout the transition process.

3. *Clarification of bias* – The researcher’s role as an administrator in CMS was described in order to provide “an open and honest narrative” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). As CMS’s assistant principal, I have a vested interest in the data that was gathered in this study. I am highly committed to the success of my students and staff members. Within the framework of this study, it was important for the validity of the study and for the safekeeping of the participants that I remained transparent regarding my roles in both the study and in the school.

4. *Peer debriefing* – The researcher regularly engaged in conversations about the study with two middle level educators, allowing them serve as peers “who review and ask questions” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). These individuals did not work at CMS. Discussions and correspondence centered on the processes used in the study, as well as, initial findings and interpretations of the raw data (Merriam, 2002). These discussions also contributed to the development of the final product that was generated as a result of the data gathered. During these discussions, the interdisciplinary teams were referred to by their pseudonyms, and all student participants in focus groups were referred to by their assigned numbers in order to protect the confidentiality of individual participants.

5. *Triangulation of data* – Three focus group interviews and 209 open-ended writing samples served as the sources of data for this study. Information students shared at a focus group interview was able to be incorporated at subsequent focus group

sessions, which allowed for the opportunity to check ideas, themes, and interpretations of emerging findings (Merriam, 2002). In addition, data gathered through interviews were regularly compared to data trends which emerged in the writing samples for similarities and differences.

Findings

The findings from the focus group sessions and the anonymous student writing samples will be explored in this section; discussion is presented within typological associations.

Focus Group Interviews

The group dynamics were very interesting from one focus group session to the next. The Wizards were the first group to be interviewed. Although the students got along well, as soon as the recording device was turned on, they became somewhat stiff. As the interview progressed, the students loosened up, and even started joking about various aspects of their transition. One student in particular, initiated the jokes through his tone and mannerisms. His tone and reflections broke the ice for the rest of the group, allowing a natural, comfortable discussion to occur. This student was helpful in counterbalancing one of his teammates who had many complaints about processes and procedures. In general, the team offered an abundance of information that created a clear picture on how they felt CMS supported them throughout the initial transition into the school and throughout the months to follow.

Because the Stars were a larger group, it was more difficult to solicit the same depth of discussion that took place with the Wizards. Additionally, the students that were selected for this group were naturally quiet and reserved. They interacted well with one

another and were very conscious of being respectful. While their answers were succinct, they were very focused on responding appropriately and completely for each question. They offered suggestions and solutions to enhance programs, and presented clear information that additional supports were needed for students to succeed academically.

The final group to be interviewed was the Magic team. Before the interview began, the students asked many questions about my doctoral pursuit. They found it very interesting that I am still a student and several expressed that they felt “honored” to be helping me with the process. They were enthusiastic from the moment they walked into the conference room. At first I was concerned that their enthusiasm was going to lead to a difficult interview session where the students would continually need to be refocused, but the students took the interview process very seriously. Their discussion was lively, and students actively listened to one another, often repeating or referring back to what one of their classmates said earlier. The energy level was upbeat and very positive. When students were discussing elements that were of concern to them, they were presented with a positive spin. Following the interview, several students from this team approached me asking if we could hold another session and if they could help at the upcoming and summer orientation sessions.

Physical and procedural elements. At each of the three focus group sessions, students cited locks and lockers as their initial concern coming to middle school. During the Stars’ session, half of the students indicated lockers as a major concern, and those students who did not list lockers at first, offered their insights about them throughout the discussion. One student said she was easily frustrated by, “forgetting the locker combo or where the locker is because all of the lockers look the same and it’s kind of like a maze

here.” Another student added, “they’re [students] just not used to opening and closing locks.” Other students piggybacked these sentiments, adding the additional challenge of having two lockers, one in the hall and one in the gym locker room. The students discussed the need to memorize two different combinations, and often found themselves mixing the two combinations together. One student remarked that, “it’s hard to memorize your combination because you have to remember a lot of other stuff too.” When discussing the lockers in the gym, one student explained that learning the second combination was bothersome at first

because I couldn’t open my locker and I made the mistake of telling someone my combination...for a couple of weeks I would find my clothes thrown everywhere.... I think you should stress not to give anyone your combination.

Throughout the discussion on lockers, students who were listening to the speaker sat nodding their heads in agreement. Students felt incoming sixth graders need to understand the importance of not sharing their combinations with anyone, not even a best friend. Despite lockers being an obvious source of anxiety for the students, they did comment that having time at orientation to practice opening locks greatly reduced their stress levels. Students requested additional time to practice opening locks; several students added that it would be beneficial for the school to assign their actual lock and locker at orientation. They claimed that having their locks early would allow the students the opportunity to memorize their combination before the first day of school.

Students also indicated that they were initially concerned about “getting from class to class.” One student stated, “It’s hard to remember if it is an A day or a B day and you can go to the wrong class.” Several students talked about getting “confused” because

the building is so much larger than their elementary schools. One student stated, “I get confused with which classroom it is and when to go there.” Students qualified the concern about getting lost; emphasizing that their core academic classes were not necessarily a problem because the classrooms are arranged in one hallway, but locating the electives and physical education classes presented a challenge for the first few weeks.

When reflecting on the orientation programs utilized by the school, students made numerous comments about how these programs positively impacted their transition. The students most often referred to experiences offered at the summer orientation as most helpful in allowing them to develop a level of comfort within their new school. Nearly all students indicated that having the opportunity to practice opening locks was helpful. One student indicated, “It helped because we got to open a lock and see how hard it was.” Another student talked about being able to explore the school, “The older kids that were there showed us where all the classes were, if we had anything upstairs, where all the downstairs classes were, and which stairways you could go up and down on and which you could just go up and which you could just go down.” Students also discussed the benefits of learning the procedures and expectations during the summer orientation. One student remarked:

I thought it was helpful because I didn't know what was in store for me. When I came to this school [for orientation], I was like, oh, it's just a school, everything is alright. I already had a talk with Mrs. Rappa and stuff, so I already know they are going to make this place safe for us. And when I saw the 7th and 8th graders were upstairs, I thought, there's not much going to be as much bothering as last year.

As students relayed their opinions about the orientation program, some of the students laughed and smiled, recalling the different activities they did. When one student commented that the information provided was helpful, or having time to practice locks was helpful, other students regularly supported the speaker saying “yeah” or “I agree.” In one group, all of the students indicated that because of the summer orientation they felt “comfortable for the first day of school.” One student stated, “It helped me go down with the stress so I didn’t have a lot of stress for the new school.” Another student piggybacked this sentiment by saying, “You weren’t scared for the first day of school. You were actually excited.”

When offering suggestions for improvements, students simply wanted “more time” at orientation. They requested more time to play with locks, more time to explore the building, and more time to meet their teachers and classmates.

Social and emotional elements. Throughout the focus group sessions, students actively discussed concerns relevant to social issues. Some of these issues specifically pertained to the initial transition into their new school: making new friends, meeting new people, and meeting new teachers. As students offered additional insights and opinions, some concerns were those that developed as the year progressed and resulted in ongoing issues.

Most of the students stated or agreed with the notion that they were very concerned about “making new friends.” While many students felt worried about making friends before the school year started, most indicated it was actually quite easy and a needless source of stress. One student felt, “Making new friends was easy because you

have your classmates and you also see them at your locker. It was easy to talk to them and get used to them.” Another student added:

Making new friends was easy for me because I’ve been told I’m a very outgoing person. And when I came here, the first couple of days of school, the school actually kind of helped in a way to help me make new friends, because there is this one girl who pretty much has the same schedule as me. She’s in all my classes except Spanish and art. And that helped me, and we made friends.

On one of the teams, four of the six participants indicated that making friends was easy for them. When asked to explain, one student remarked, “When you’re in the same classes with other people, you’re kind of forced to talk to them. So you have interaction with other people in your classes and you can easily make friends.” Another student followed up by saying, “I think the school helped us make new friends by having the orientation before the school year started.” At this remark, several of the students muttered “uh-huh” indicating their agreement. In general, students felt that being organized by teams was helpful in allowing them the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging.

Several students brought up the possibility of being “bullied” or “bothered by the older kids” as an area of concern before the school year began. When reflecting on aspects of the transition that were easy for them, one student stated, “Usually everyone is afraid of the older kids because of the stereotypes, but there isn’t need because they’re upstairs and you’re downstairs.” He went on to say, “And as you’re passing through the hallway they don’t do anything. They’re too focused on their friends and not yours.” As the students in each group discussed interaction with the older students, they described it

as something they feared before coming to school, but quickly realized their worries were for no reason.

While students indicated that many of their initial concerns regarding social issues were unwarranted, they did elaborate upon problems that developed as the school year progressed. One student astutely remarked:

Meeting new people is the easy part, and making friends was the hard part. Yeah, that was the same thing with me, I met a lot of new people but it's hard making friends with some people, because some people you want to avoid. And you don't know who to necessarily avoid unless you talk to them or hear what they have to say in the hallway. So it's kind of hard because you can't pick and choose people who are appropriate, who's inappropriate, who has...who will shut you out in a month or two.

As this individual pointed out, there is a distinct difference between meeting new people and making new friends. This comment led into a discussion on “gossip,” “rumors,” and “drama.” Many of the students indicated that “dealing with gossip” was a “big thing” at middle school. One student expressed feelings about dealing with gossip and rumors, stating:

I feel that it's easy and hard. It's easy because if you know that it's not true because you're really close with that person that the rumors are going around about that you can tell a teacher that you know it's not true. And it's hard because it could be about you and you're trying to convince everybody that it's not true but they're not believing you, they're believing the person who started it.

As another team discussed gossip and rumors they felt that there was nothing the school could do about rumors, “because they’re just rumors and you can’t stop them, they just spread.” Only one student indicated that seeking assistance from the guidance office was helpful in resolving issues that developed. The general feeling amongst the participants was that the school was not in a position to make improvements in this area. While students were able to offer clear suggestions for other areas, particularly those that related to supporting their physical needs, this was an area where they were at a loss for how to improve the situation.

Intellectual, cognitive and academic elements. Participants on all three teams repeatedly reported that they were not adequately prepared for the amount of classwork, the amount of homework, and the degree of difficulty of the assignments associated with the middle school experience. On one team, the majority of students identified “getting too much homework” as a significant challenge, although most students seemed to accept this as a part of being in middle school. One student indicated:

For the first few days of school, it was kind of hard and I was wondering...why are all of the teachers giving me so much homework? But later on I realized that I’m in sixth grade, and now, since we’re in middle school, you’re going to be getting a lot of homework.

Another student indicated that she now understood the advice shared by the guidance counselor during orientation. She said, “I remember three words that you guys said and that were really important and it was ‘Do Your Homework!’” When the student made this remark, the other students in the group said it with her and laughed. They nodded their heads in agreement with her sentiments. The students on one team indicated that they felt

the elementary school teachers needed to do more to prepare them for the amount of work they would be expected to complete in middle school. One student stated, “I think it’s up to the elementary teachers because if the elementary teacher gives you a lot of homework then you’re ready, maybe you’re ready for 6th grade. But if you get a little homework, you actually won’t be prepared for this school.” Another student agreed, saying, “Elementary schools should make the teachers give you a little more homework going year by year so in first grade a little homework and year by year you get more and more homework. So you get more prepared for sixth grade.” A third student contributed to this conversation by adding, “I think they should not give piles of homework but give homework in each subject so we’re used to that. That’s what usually makes a lot of homework and if they give homework in each subject, you’ll be better at it and the homework in middle school will be easier.”

Several students spoke about the need to “be more organized” in middle school than in elementary school. Students on one team spoke highly of their teachers’ use of interactive notebooks, and suggested that, “we should start interactive notebooks in elementary.” The interactive notebook implements a Cornell note-taking approach, where students record teacher presented information on the right side of their notebooks and record their own reflections and reactions on the left. Students are also required to tape all handouts provided by the teacher into their notebook. While most of the students acknowledged the interactive notebook as a tool for maintaining a well-organized notebook, several complained about the level of effort required to make it efficient. One student stated, “Every single paper has to go into your notebook and that just makes your notebook really thick and it’s hard to put it into your binder and stuff.” Another student

piggybacked these thoughts, adding, “I personally didn’t like that. Because I forget to tape something in and then I pick up the notebook, it all falls out and then, if you were absent one day, you have to go back and tape them in and then re-do it.” There was one student who called the notebook “annoying.” Yet, all of the students called for the increased need and desire to be organized.

The students in each group also focused much of their discussion on having multiple teachers throughout the day. Overwhelmingly, the students indicated that they liked having multiple teachers. One student explained that most people thought it would be hard to have so many teachers, “but it’s not because you don’t have to sit in the same class all day. It’s actually more refreshing to move to a new class and, like, you’re not going to fall asleep because you’re doing a whole new thing...you’re just not bored and it’s more fun.” The students in this group agreed, several noting that in elementary school, if you had a teacher you didn’t like, you were stuck the whole day with her. One student explained that in the middle school, having multiple teachers is good because, “you might like Mrs. Babooshka’s way of doing things but another teacher, Mr. Herff, he might teach and you might not like his way.”

While students stated that they liked having multiple teachers, most had mixed feelings over having three different science teachers over the course of the school year. Two years ago, the school piloted a program where each of the three science teachers became responsible for one topic within the sixth grade curriculum. One teacher teaches chemistry, one teaches physics, and the third teaches geology, astronomy and environmental issues. The students begin the first marking period with the science teacher assigned to their team, learning about scientific method, writing lab reports, and

general principles of science. The next three marking periods they rotate to each of the other teachers. One student indicated, “I kind of liked how we switched and learned about different things but it gets confusing.” Another student noted that the differences in the science teachers’ expectations and styles was a challenge, noting, “either we should all use notebooks or we should all use binders.” On this same vein, another student remarked:

All of the science teachers they shouldn’t do all different things. If one science teacher is doing the ‘dessert,’ then maybe the other science teachers should be doing the same. So we don’t have to get all mixed up and confused. Because when I went into my science class, I had no idea what ‘dessert’ meant. It was different for me.

The students’ call for consistency and commonality was also addressed in reference to some of their core classes. On one team in particular, the students felt that the teachers needed to collaborate about techniques and processes. “For example, right now we have two English teachers and they both have different ways of teaching. So it’s kind of hard, because for one teacher we have to do an open-ended a certain way and then for the other, we have to do it a different way.” This group of students went on to express the need for additional academic support structures.

Personally, I think we should have a program where if you’re struggling with a certain subject or something you can meet with that teacher after or maybe even before school, and you can figure out how you’re struggling or what you’re doing, or what you’re struggling with.

Another student on the same team noted that one of their teachers “has tutoring...students tutor other students.” Another added that most teachers were also available at lunch to give extra help if students were willing to give up their lunch time.

The students on one team also spent a bit of time talking about their interactions with technology. Their teachers utilize technology as a learning tool on a daily basis. While the students indicated that the teachers taught them how to use the technology at the beginning of the year, it still would have been helpful to know what was going to be used so “we could be prepared” to engage in blogs, use wikis, and explore other international networking sites.

Anonymous Writing Samples

209 anonymous writing samples were provided for inclusion in this study. The samples, while anonymous, did require students to identify their gender and their team affiliation. The author of one writing sample circled both male and female, and all three team names. This student also wrote answers that were of no relevance to the questions asked; therefore, this sample was removed from the group. Of the 208 samples remaining, the following indicates the breakdown by team and gender:

Table 1
Breakdown of Student Writing Samples

Team Name	Total Received	Boys	Girls
Wizards	86	42	44
Stars	78	31	47
Magic	44	20	24

Since all students were offered the opportunity to respond, the writing sample includes opinions from both regular and special education students, students who have been referred to the office for disciplinary reasons, students who may have missed an orientation session, and students who transferred into the school after the start of the school year.

It was clear in reviewing the writing samples that the majority of students took the time to provide their school with serious, thoughtful feedback, both about the positive aspects of their transition and about areas where they think improvements can be made. There were notable differences between the samples provided by girls and boys. Generally speaking, the boys were more concerned about physical and procedural elements than any other aspect of their transition. The next greatest area of concern focused on the ability to make friends. The most significant academic issue to boys centered on homework, the amount of homework and the degree of difficulty. For girls, social issues seemed to be a slightly greater concern than physical and procedural elements. They were worried about making friends, fitting in, and “drama.”

There were also variations described by the students regarding their overall experiences based on the team with which they are affiliated. The students on Wizards and Stars teams described positive experiences overall throughout their transition. They described feelings of being “nervous and excited at the same time,” but that their teachers were very supportive in helping them adjust. Many students on the Magic team made statements that offered a negative perspective. Students indicated that the teachers were “mean” and that they “yell a lot,” yet these students often contradicted themselves by

indicating that if students follow the rules, do their work, and respect one another “you’ll be fine.”

Physical and procedural elements. On nearly every student writing sample, students proclaimed one of their biggest concerns when transitioning to middle school was mastering locks and lockers. One student stated, “At first lockers can be a pain in the neck if you never had one before.” Students expressed worry over not being able to open locks quickly, which would then result in them being late to class, another fear that was stated on numerous samples. Many students described frustration over “lock-flipping,” something that other students do when a lock is found unlocked and hanging on an unattended locker. The students described lock-flipping as placing the lock through the locker hole so the dial is then backwards, facing the locker instead of the user. Opening a flipped lock requires a student to either sit on the floor and look up at the backward facing dial, or call an adult for assistance. Throughout the written responses, students provided advice to the incoming students to “make sure you lock your lock all the way” before leaving the locker and “whatever you do, do not share your locker combination with anyone!” Locks and lockers were the element of the transition about which students had the most to say.

Students also expressed great concern over “getting lost,” “not knowing where my classes were,” and “getting to class on time.” Coming from elementary schools where all of the daily activities, including lunch, were done in their classroom, students expressed concern about the process of “changing classes” or “switching classes.” Students resoundingly stated they were concerned about memorizing their schedules and “being able to find my classrooms.”

Another new concept for the students transitioning to CMS was having physical education class daily and being required to change their clothes in the locker room in front of their peers in order to participate. Students cited “changing in front of people for PE” and “participating in fitness day” as areas of concern when the year began. Other aspects of the transition to middle school students claimed to be concerned about were “getting organized,” “no more recess,” “having to wake up early,” “learning the lunchroom rules,” and “the bus.”

Concern over “getting in trouble,” “avoiding trouble,” or “getting consequences for fooling around” was prevalent in the responses written by boys. Many of the boys noted that they were afraid that they were going to get “detention” or “ISS (in-school suspension)” for not complying with school rules or classroom procedures. Only a handful of girls expressed this as a source of concern.

When asked to describe how these challenges or concerns were resolved for them, most students indicated that all of the orientations were helpful in giving them information about the procedures in their new school, but the summer orientation was particularly helpful in providing the opportunity to “practice opening locks,” “learning how to read my schedule,” and “having the chance to tour the building” with no other students there. Students requested the orientation program be longer to allow additional time to practice opening locks and explore the building. Students also noted that the summer orientation gave them the opportunity to “meet their teachers, their guidance counselor, and the assistant principal.” They stated that the “slide show” was helpful to begin to understand the expectations, rules, and policies of their new school. When describing the orientation programs, one student explained, “I think when Mrs. Rappa

explained things to us it eased my mind off things. The orientation helped me see that middle school wasn't that much more different than elementary school."

Beyond the orientations, many students noted that the teachers were very helpful during the first few weeks of school. They advised new sixth graders, "don't worry, the first few days the teachers are easy on you." Several students explained that learning where their classes were located was "not that big a deal," complimenting the school for putting their team's classrooms "right next to each other."

Social and emotional elements. When examining the social elements that students listed as areas of concern when transitioning from the elementary school, the most frequently referred to item was "making new friends." Students expressed concern over leaving their elementary schools and not being able to "see my friends from elementary school." They indicated that they were worried about "fitting in" with new people and in a new school. The concept of making new friends was a concern for both boys and girls, and members of all three teams. Some students indicated that they were concerned about what team they would be on and who the people were going to be on that team. Students also expressed concern about the first day at lunch and determining with whom they would sit. Most students described the summer orientation as being most helpful for giving them the opportunity to meet students and teachers before the first day of school. The ability to know members of their classes and identify a familiar face when they walked into the school on the first day resulted in students stating that they "felt more comfortable," "felt less anxious," "was less nervous," and "was able to feel excited and less scared." Most students indicated that within a week, they felt comfortable.

Another area of concern for students was the possibility of interacting with the older students and the possibility of being bullied. Students described fear over the “bigger kids bothering” them. Several students identified that they were concerned about “being stuffed inside lockers” and envisioned middle school like it is portrayed in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* movie and in various television programs. Most students were quick to point out that while they were worried about bullying and about interactions with the older students, they never had an issue. As one girl noted:

They [incoming sixth graders] might experience being bullied because there are a lot more things that are bad in middle school than in elementary school. If that happens they might be scared to go to school. This hasn't happened to me, so I am happy to come to school in the morning.

Another student commented on bullying stating, “One thing you might expect during middle school is bullies. I've never been bullied, but it can happen to anyone so watch your back.” To further demonstrate that the concept of being stuffed in a locker was something that happens in Hollywood, one student pointed out, “and our lockers are way too small for anyone to fit inside anyway!” Several students pointed to information shared at the summer orientation that allowed them to feel more at ease over the potential interaction with the older students. Others cited the organization of the grade levels, with the preponderance of sixth grade classes located on the lower level of the building and the upper grades located on the upper level, as a source of relief.

Many of the girls described having issues with “drama” and “friends changing.” These appeared to be ongoing issues as opposed to issues faced with the initial transition. Several girls talked about how a “best friend will go to the dark side without you even

knowing” and “they will use you and treat you horribly.” Another girl talked about a “frienemie” trying to “turn everyone against me because she doesn’t like me anymore.” This student went on to say, “but I don’t care, I’m here to learn not socialize.” Several students gave advice to the upcoming sixth graders, telling them “don’t lose yourself in the drama,” not to try to handle things by themselves, to seek assistance from their guidance counselor or their parents. They indicated that students are often concerned that getting help will result in their friend becoming more angry or aggressive, although they noted that the fear was often not the reality, that getting help resolved the problem rather than make it worse.

Another concern that was only expressed by girls was “being liked by my teachers.” The boys wanted to know who their teachers were, whether the class was going to be hard or easy, and about the possibility of getting in trouble for their behavior. The girls expressed more concern for the teachers liking them and “getting along with” them. Most students described stories similar to one student who stated, “I was really nervous at first. The CMS teachers made it feel nice.” Both boys and girls described the teachers as being the primary source of support as they got used to classroom practices and building processes.

There was a noticeable difference in the positive social experiences described by students on Wizards and Stars. On these two teams, the positive aspects of the comments about their experiences with friends and meeting teachers outweighed their initial fears. On the Magic team, many of the students described negative interactions with peers and with teachers. Students described the teachers as “mean,” “angry,” and “loud.” Many of the girls on this team expressed concern about the amount of “drama” and “gossip” that

they had to deal with on a regular basis. One student wished that the teachers “were more supportive.” A common description was that the teachers didn’t want to hear about the students’ concerns or issues. Several students felt a “student support group” or a “big brother/big sister” program would assist in helping them deal with the social elements associated with being in sixth grade.

Intellectual, cognitive and academic elements. Across the three teams, there was resounding concern expressed regarding the amount of homework students receive on a daily basis and the increased level of difficulty of the work. Several students noted, “Fifth graders should expect a lot of homework in middle school.” Students repeatedly advised incoming sixth graders to, “do your homework,” a mantra that was pumped into their heads by their guidance counselor. Several students made the connection between completing homework and doing well on other classroom tasks, quizzes, and tests. One student stated:

I think the only thing I really need to say is do your homework. In middle school you have to do your homework because it can really affect your grade. I know I started to not do homework assignments, and my grade got lowered. But, now I do it every day, and it really helps.

Another student relayed his story about homework and its impact on his grades:

Homework is a big deal, so DO IT! You might not think it is a big priority but it is. My first marking period I did great on quizzes and tests but I missed 5 homework assignments and was at an F. I decided to make a change and then brought myself up to a mediocre grade of a C+.

Students stated “studying” was necessary to be successful. Another student said that to be successful, “don’t wait until the last minute to do your projects.” A student on the same team noted, “work hard for everything you do because it’s not as easy as it was before.” Many of the students indicated that middle school classes required them to “be organized,” “be prepared,” and “be more responsible” than what was expected of them in elementary school.

Students discussed the importance of asking for and getting extra help right away. They also discussed strategies their teachers used to help them be more successful. One student, who acknowledged homework was a challenge, indicated that, “my challenge with homework was resolved when I had a meeting with my teachers and I signed a contract.” The teachers’ use of an ISP was referred to as his means to success. Another student advised incoming sixth graders, “You should know that you have to write your homework in your planner! And always do your homework because if you don’t, you’ll get a progress report. Man! I hate those!” Other students referred to interventions teachers used to support their academic performance as “lunch bunch,” “lunch detention,” and “extra help before or after school.”

Some students commented on the use of the “interactive notebook” as a tool that allowed them the ability to be organized and succeed academically. Students indicated that they lose fewer papers and could more easily find information when needed. One student suggested the elementary school teachers show students how to use this system in order to better prepare the students for the expectations of the middle school.

Another academic area that students discussed was their science class rotation. Throughout the writing samples, students indicated that it was more interesting to hear

about science from a few different perspectives, but that getting used to three different teachers' teaching styles was "hard." Many students indicated that if the teachers had "similar expectations" or conducted class with some commonalities, such as notebook organization, that would allow them to be "less confused." A similar sentiment was described by students on one team about their classes. Several students indicated it would be helpful for teachers to talk about how much homework they are each giving on any given night. Students felt that by collaborating, the teachers could reduce the amount of homework being given out thereby increasing the amount students were able to complete.

Interpretation of Findings

After I examined the data based on typologies, it was important to reflect on that data and what it indicated in response to the guiding questions for this research project. An interpretation, specifically as the data relate to each of the research questions, is included below.

Research Question 1

How do students describe their feelings about the transition from elementary to middle school? The overwhelming majority of students describe their experienced transitioning into CMS in a positive manner. Almost all students used emotions such as "nervous," "scared," "happy" and "excited" in the same sentence to describe the emotional experience associated with starting middle school. Students repeatedly reported feeling more "confident," "comfortable," or "less anxious" after each of the orientation programs. The summer orientation program was referred to as being most beneficial in reducing students' anxieties and concerns about coming to middle school.

When students were asked to summarize their middle school experience in one sentence, responses were overwhelmingly positive. One student wrote, “As a 5th grader, I was mortified toward the major change. Although, I was surprised to see how it went smoother than I expected and how the programs really were beneficial.” Another student presented a similar perspective, “It is not that hard and you will get used to it, although you may think it’s scary, it really is not.” A few students brought humor to their responses. One indicated:

If your older brother or family member says that it’s [middle school] a horrible nightmare or the worst three years of your life THERE (sic) LYING! It’s really fun and not at all bad.

Another student playfully advised future students, “Don’t hesitate, be very relaxed, don’t panic, ask questions, and last but not least don’t lose your bus pass. P.S. Have fun, while following the rules.” Throughout the writing samples students made comments like “CMS rocks!” or “CMS is awesome.” Many students indicated “I love it here” and “middle school is so much better than elementary school.”

Out of the 208 analyzed responses, two students presented glaringly negative opinions about their experiences transitioning into CMS. Both were boys on the Magic team. One of the students stated:

It is really hard. I hate it. It is horrible. Never waste money on Snapple. Go across the street and buy one for a buck! The pizza tastes like rubber. This is a dumb school. This school is really poor and cheap. The teachers are mean and strict and there’s no study hall. Elementary school is better. I hate this cheap school.

The second student began his response by indicating the rules are “more strict” in middle school and that if you behave “your (sic) good.” But he forewarned students that, “CMS seemed so good but don’t believe any of it. Teachers are persuasive but once you see it yourself, WOW! Watch out.” While other students from this team presented some negative feedback, the overwhelming majority still expressed positive feelings about the school and their transition. These two students were the most extreme responses, and their opinions did not reflect the larger population.

Throughout the data analysis, it became clear that students felt conflicting emotions with the start of the new school year. As a result of the summer orientation, students described feeling less anxious and uncomfortable about starting the school year, and the excitement of the process became more prominent. Most students described feeling like they “got it” by the beginning of the second marking period.

Research Question 2

How do students perceive their physical needs are or are not supported? It was interesting to see that the overwhelming majority of concerns students claimed to have when transitioning into middle school were based on physical elements. Maslow’s (1987) Hierarchy of Needs explored the theory that people cannot function within higher levels of operation, unless their basic needs for food, shelter, and safety are met. The responses that the students provided support Maslow’s theory (1987). The students’ primary and immediate concerns were focused on basic needs such as: opening a locker, finding classrooms, being on time to class, changing for physical education in front of peers, navigating the lunchroom, understanding building rules and procedures, learning the procedures for their each of their classes.

Throughout the writing samples and the focus group sessions, students referred to experiences at the three different orientation sessions as being very helpful in allowing them the opportunity to learn about their new school. Students repeatedly cited the summer orientation as the most helpful for practicing opening locks and lockers, and for having the time to explore the school to find their classes. The information provided to them at the orientation was described in a very positive manner as “helpful,” “informative,” and “explained expectations clearly.”

When asked when concerns were resolved, students almost always accounted for physical needs being addressed before the first day of school or “within the first few weeks.” Most students indicated that they felt by October, or the beginning of marking period 2, that they had established a routine and felt comfortable in their new environment.

Research Question 3

How do students perceive their social-emotional needs are or are not supported?

Based on responses students provided about the aspects of social adjustment and social interaction, I believe students either try to downplay or genuinely do not realize that the social aspects of the transition to middle school are as great a challenge as they think. For most students, the physical aspects of coming to a new school take precedent over the social elements, but these aspects become intertwined and are occurring simultaneously. The primary social concern for both boys and girls was making new friends. Many of the students explained that the programs in place at the school allowed this to be a needless worry. Students felt that the summer orientation was a great opportunity to meet students in their classes and meet their teachers for the first time. They also indicated that the

teachers created opportunities for “get-to-know you games” throughout the first week of school. Student responses indicated that these efforts relieved their anxieties about meeting people.

Social issues were a major concern for the girls in the sixth grade, and not necessarily during the initial move into the sixth grade. Based on the girls’ responses and reactions, this is an area where they need additional support in order to feel comfortable and confident. The “drama” that many of the girls described has been noted in previous research as a contributing factor to loss of self-esteem and to negative impact to academic performance (Akos, 2005; Akos & Martin, 2003; Brown, 2010; Eccles et al., 1993; Elias et al., 1992; Gruber & Fineran, 2007; Roeser et al., 2008; Wigfield et al., 1991).

Throughout the writing samples, there was greater concern expressed about the possibility of bullying than was expressed during the focus group sessions. Also interesting was the negative feeling that was expressed by students on the Magic team throughout many of the writing samples. The students from the same team that participated in the focus group interviews were mostly positive about their experiences being members of that team. The contradiction may be because all students, including those who accumulated discipline referrals throughout the school year, completed the writing samples. The fact that there were no students in the focus group sessions that were referred to the office for disciplinary reasons may provide an explanation for the discrepancy.

Research Question 4

How do students perceive their intellectual-cognitive needs are or are not supported? As students transitioned into the middle school, the academic aspect of school

seemed to be the least of their concerns. Students coming to the middle school were so focused on ensuring that they knew the procedures, knew where things were located, and could open their lockers that they almost seemed to forget that school is for learning. It wasn't until the procedural elements were addressed that students even began considering the type of school work they were responsible for completing. Students often used the word "overwhelmed" to describe how they felt about the amount and caliber of work they were required to complete in middle school. They acknowledged that middle school was much more difficult than the elementary setting. On the written responses students, with few exceptions, identified homework as their greatest challenge. During the focus group interviews, students elaborated on this idea, further stating that they were not prepared to meet the academic challenges of middle school. Throughout the focus group interviews, it became apparent that this was an area where the students felt that they were in need of additional ongoing support.

Research Question 5

When evaluating the current transition programs in place at CMS, what do student describe as strengths or areas in need of improvement? In both the focus group interviews and throughout the writing samples, the students revealed that they found the orientation programs utilized by CMS to be effective in helping them learn the procedures of their new school and creating a sense of belonging in the school community. Most of the students saw no need for any improvements to the content of the programs. When providing feedback, most students wanted the summer orientation program to be longer to allow them more time to practice opening locks and exploring the school. They also wanted additional time at this session to meet their new classmates

and interact with their teachers. Students asked for the opportunity to ask more questions and gain additional information from the students who were most recently in the sixth grade.

Overarching Question

How do students transitioning into CMS describe the support, or lack thereof, which they received throughout the transition? The analysis of data indicated that the transition programs in place at CMS have been effective in supporting students during the initial transition into the middle school setting. Student responses revealed areas where ongoing support later in the school year by the teams, guidance staff, and building administration may be needed to maximize students' ability to succeed in school. In particular, girls appeared to need additional support in responding to social and emotional issues. Additionally, all students expressed the need for increased academic support.

As students described the various programs in place, they regularly stated that summer orientation was particularly helpful in allowing them to understand the expectations and procedures in the school. They also felt that summer orientation provided them the time to practice opening locks and explore the school without the older students present. However, students repeatedly asked for more time to explore their new learning environment, specifying the desire for a longer tour, a longer orientation, for more practice with locks. The most prominent social concern expressed by students was making new friends. Other social and academic elements described by the students often referred to ongoing concerns, those that developed as the year got underway.

Project as an Outcome: Facilitator's Guide for Student Support Groups

It was my goal throughout this research study to capture the thoughts and opinions of the students transitioning into CMS in order to gain a deeper understanding from their perspective of how their school did or did not support their developmental needs throughout the process. The desired outcome is to enhance the transition process in order to maximize the possibility for students to successfully meet the demands of the secondary school environment. Therefore, creating a new component or refining an existing component of the orientation process was justified in order to adequately support students in the areas they felt more guidance is needed.

The data from this study revealed that the school's transition programs were effectively supporting the needs of the students as they transition into CMS; therefore, it was warranted that the programs be maintained and enhanced in order to continue improving the process and, thereby, increase the potential for student success in the middle school. While students felt the programs in place supported their initial transition, they did express the need for additional social and academic support as the school year got underway. With this in mind, a facilitator's guide for the implementation of student support groups was developed to address students' developmental needs beyond the initial transition into the middle school setting. The project is explored in detail in the section to follow.

Conclusion

This single-case project study sought to capture the opinions, thoughts, and perceptions of the students experiencing the transition from elementary school into CMS with regard to how students feel they are or are not supported throughout the transition

into middle school from the elementary setting. Through data analysis of three focus group interviews and anonymous writing samples, an in-depth description of the perceptions of the students experiencing the transition to CMS was generated. The data were analyzed by organizing the information into three typological groupings: physical, social-emotional, and intellectual-cognitive, which stemmed from the review of the literature and the research questions in this study. The following measures were applied for validation: use of member checking, clarification of researcher's biases, use of peer debriefing, triangulation of data, and the development of rich, thick description.

The data analysis conducted for this study supported the findings of previous research conducted which examined the students' perceptions of the transition into middle school (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Elias et al., 1992; Midgley & Urdan, 1992). Students indicated that physical and procedural elements of the transition to middle school made up the majority of their concerns. The students described various interventions put in place by CMS to support them in this area. Overwhelmingly, students reported feeling well-supported in learning about the procedural aspects of the new school, which allowed them to feel well-adjusted to processes and procedures in a short period of time.

Students described the social aspects of the transition as being a lesser concern during the initial transition into the middle school; however, the way in which the students described these elements leads me to believe that the social aspects of the transition into middle school are, in fact, a greater concern than students may realize. Although physical aspects of the transition are concrete and more easily addressed, social

elements are ongoing and require a greater depth of ongoing support, especially for the girls (Akos, 2005; Akos & Martin, 2003).

Upon the initial transition into middle school, students did not indicate feeling concerned about the academic components of their new school. It appeared that once they settled into the procedural routines, students began to understand how different the academic expectations of the middle school are from the elementary setting. Students resoundingly stated that they were not prepared to meet the academic challenges of the middle school. The increased amount and difficulty of work were a significant challenge for students. Students voiced great concern over the high expectations of teachers, and their inability to meet those expectations without additional supports.

Overwhelmingly, students thought that the various orientation programs and the work of the teachers during the first few weeks of school were especially helpful in easing their adjustment to middle school life. They indicated that the information provided and the assistance given by staff members allowed them to feel more comfortable, more confident, and less anxious about being in a new school. The majority of students felt that keeping the programs as they existed was important. However, it was evident from the data collected that additional supports were needed to assist students beyond the initial transition process and into the school year.

Based upon the analysis of gathered data, a facilitator's guide for student support groups for incoming sixth grade students was created in order to enhance the transition programs in place at CMS and further support the developmental needs of the middle school students as they adjust to the demands of the secondary experience.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Section 1 of this project study established the local problem that prompted this case study examining students' perceptions of the transition into CMS. Section 1 also included a comprehensive review of the literature as it pertains to the middle school model, developmental needs of the young adolescent, and the impact of the transition into middle school. The research methodology employed in this case study and the research findings were explored throughout Section 2. The data analysis revealed students desired additional support throughout their sixth grade school year, particularly in meeting the academic demands of the middle school. To improve the transition process for students and incorporate an additional means of supporting them throughout their first year of middle school in an effort to increase their achievement, a facilitator's guide for student support groups was developed. Section 3 begins with a review of the literature on middle school advisory programs and then explores the facilitator's guide for student support groups in detail.

Review of the Literature

Research regarding the history of the middle school, the developmental needs of adolescents, and the elements of the middle school model were examined throughout the literature review in Section 1. The information contained in this section focuses on middle school advisory programs and the development of student support groups in the middle school.

Search Terms

Multiple sources were utilized to gather information and pertinent literature about middle school advisory programs. Some of these sources include the local public library, Rutgers University Library, and Walden University's electronic databases. Databases such as Articles First, ProQuest, EBSCO host, and Educational Resources Information Center were utilized to locate online journals and research studies. I also obtained information from websites for organizations that explore current best practices in middle level education, including the National Middle School Association and the National Association for Secondary School Principals. Google Scholar and Google were useful in seeing what other schools around the country are doing to structure programs and support students in transition. Boolean searches included, but were not limited to, the following terms: *middle school advisory programs, advisory, student support groups, student counseling groups, middle school teaming, mentoring, program development, and advisory program development*. Throughout the research on middle level advisory programs, two researchers' names regularly appeared, Akos and Galassi. Therefore, I also conducted searches specifically looking for studies conducted by these researchers.

Middle School Advisory Programs

Effective middle schools are measured by more than just student achievement scores. They are also determined by the school's ability to support the developmental needs of the young adolescents it serves (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 2003, 2003b, 2010). As discussed throughout the previous literature review, developmentally responsive middle schools emphasize learning environments that support physical, social-emotional, and intellectual-cognitive development. Two of the

most prominent organizational structures used by developmentally responsive middle schools to meet the needs of its students are teaming and advisory (Brown & Anfara, 2001). Following the Carnegie Council's report on Adolescent Development (1989), advisories received a great deal of attention as a way of supporting the various needs of the students in the middle school. NMSA (1995, 2003, 2010) and NASSP (2006) have endorsed advisory programs and have recognized them as a characteristic of an effective middle level school (Anfara, 2006).

Middle school advisory defined. The definition and purpose of an advisory program appear to depend on who is being asked. Throughout the literature that exists about advisory programs, no singular definition exists. Many studies point to Beane and Lipka (1987) when providing a definition of advisory programs. They described advisories as follows:

Advisory programs are designed to deal directly with the affective needs of transescents. Activities may range from nonformal interactions to the use of systematically developed units whose organizing centers are drawn from common problems, needs, interests, or concerns of transescents, such as 'getting along with peers,' 'living in the school,' or 'developing self-concept.' In the best of these programs, transescents have an opportunity to get to know one adult really well, to find a point of security in the institution, and to learn about what it means to be a healthy human being. (p. 40)

When describing advisory programs, Jackson and Davis (2000) expanded upon Beane and Lipka's definition, calling for advisory programs that allow every student in the school to be "well known by at least one adult" (p. 142) who can serve as a role

model, mentor, and student advocate. Nearly 20 years after Beane and Lipka defined advisories, Shulkind and Foote (2009) connected the definitions of six previous studies to develop a broad definition for advisories as follows:

Advisory programs are configurations in which an adult advisor meets regularly during the school day with a group of students to provide academic and social-emotional mentorship and support, to create personalization within the school, and to facilitate a small peer community of learners. (p. 21)

While there is no one specific definition of middle school advisory, many definitions contain similar phrases including: creating positive relationships between advisors-advisees (NMSA, 2010), developing meaningful relationships (Shulkind & Foote, 2009), designating a staff member to be responsible for a small group of students (Burkhardt, 1999), regularly scheduled sessions that take place during the school day (Burkhardt & Kane, 2005; Galasssi et al., 2004), ongoing conferences with advisors and advisees (Burkhardt & Kane, 2005), establishing high levels of connectedness (Shulkind & Foote, 2009), addressing affective, cognitive, and administrative aspects of the child's learning and learning environment (Anfara, 2006), shaping positive identity development and assisting in organization of academic goals (Akos, 2005), developing a trusting and caring community with an advisor providing support for student growth and development (Knowles & Brown, 2000).

Advisory programs are different from counseling groups. In counseling groups, the emphasis is on specific problem-solving or addressing individualized personal issues (Jackson & Davis, 2000; MacLaury & Gratz, 2003). Advisory groups allow the adults of the school the opportunity to build relationships and support students, possibly

identifying those students who require more intense one-on-one counseling from the school counselor or a professional counselor outside of school (MacLaury & Gratz, 2003).

Purpose of advisory programs. Just as there are multiple definitions of middle school advisory programs, the purpose of advisory programs is equally debatable. Brown and Anfara (2001) identified the purposes of advisories as: creating opportunities for social development, establishing an academic support system, establishing the potential for positive rapport development between students and staff, allowing each student to have an adult advocate in the school, and promoting a positive school culture (p. 2). Anfara (2006) also noted the purpose of advisories as follows: provide individual attention to students, create a caring community where all students have the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging, allow teaching staff to address the affective development of students, allow students the ability to develop interpersonal and social-emotional interaction skills (p. 2). Throughout the literature on middle school advisories, there is agreement that effective advisory programs have advisors that support the academic and social-emotional development of the young people in the group. Galassi et al. (2004) identified the purpose of advisories is to create a sense of belonging or community development without the pressure of grades or assessments.

Characteristics and benefits of effective advisory programs. The organizational structure of advisories varies greatly. Jackson and Davis (2000) promoted advisories that meet on a daily basis, during the school day, at a specific time. They explained:

Ideally, these groups meet for 25 to 30 minutes each day, or, at the least, three times a week. The advisory often takes place at the beginning or end of the school day; it should not be squeezed into a lunch period, scheduled irregularly as time allows, or conducted when another activity is cancelled. (p. 143)

Much literature on advisory programs supported daily contact time for advisors-advisees. The actual implementation of programs varies tremendously from school to school. Rottier et al. (2009) found that when done daily, advisory periods create flexible time for tutoring, teambuilding, academic and social skill building, and development of a caring community.

When one is considering the number of students and the grouping of students for an advisory, again, variation is evident. The overarching goal is to develop small groups; therefore, groups should consist of between 10 and 15 students. NMSA (2003b) recommended no more than 20 students in order for a group to still be effective. Burkhardt (1999) noted, “an ideal advisory group contains ten to twelve students. Advocacy takes time, and the smaller the group size, the more effective the advisor can be” (p. 4). Because much of the research on advisory programs promotes a whole school approach where every student receives an adult advocate, there are various configurations of the student groups. Arrangements include groups of the same gender or same age. Some groups are determined by the students’ team affiliation. Others explore multi-age grouping. There is also debate as to whether or not an advisor should remain with the same students throughout their middle school experience to maintain the positive relationships developed throughout the course of the initial year.

Advisors play a key role in guiding students toward success in the academic setting. Sessions can include providing students with instruction on effective study habits, organizational strategies, effective note-taking, and developing academic responsibility (Atkins & DeBoard, 2003; Burkhardt, 1999; Convery & Tremble, 2003; Galassi et al., 2004; MacIver & Epstein, 1999). Additionally, advisories can build communication skills including: active listening, speaking, writing, and electronic communication (Galassi et al., 2004). The advisor should also be actively involved in monitoring students' progress in their classes by reviewing student grade reports, mid-term progress indicators, and final marking period report cards (Anfara, 2006; Anfara, 2006b; MacIver & Epstein, 1999).

Effective middle school advisory programs also include activities that support the development of the affective domain in students (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003, 2010). Burns (1995) indicated that the role of a middle school is not just to focus on reading, writing, and arithmetic, but to also develop the fourth R, relationships. Middle school advisories allow for the development of meaningful relationships between students and staff, as well as among the students themselves. Strong advisories foster a sense of connectedness and belonging (Shulkind & Foote, 2009). Student advisory programs support student identity formation, social awareness, and foster a caring environment (Akos & Martin, 2003; Shulkind & Foote, 2009). Through advisory activities that emphasize character education, students can learn to positively interact with other members of the school community and the community at-large (Deitte, 2002). As Burkhardt and Kane (2005) stated, "advisory programs that focus on the needs of

young adolescents provide such attention and support. As the adage goes, ‘Kids don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care’” (p. 69).

The success of an advisory is contingent upon there being a clear vision and goal for the specific advisory group (Burns, 1996). Without a clearly developed focus, the advisory group may not reach its fullest potential (Anfara, 2006; MacIver, 1990). Some advisory groups follow clear lesson plans or structured activities (Rottier et al., 2009), while others leave room for student input on advisory topics. Deitte (2002) noted the importance of allowing students the opportunity to reflect on the activities conducted during advisory. The self-reflection and self-analysis often results in students thinking about the activity as it applies to the world around them, thereby potentially impacting their choices in the future.

Burkhardt and Kane (2005) provided narratives of schools that implemented advisory programs. Participants in one of the schools remarked that students in the advisory groups had less discipline and provided a peer support network with academics and social issues. Akos and Martin (2003) revealed a positive relationship between the use of student support groups and the impact of the transition into the middle school setting from the elementary school environment. Burkhardt (1999) indicated “schools that have instituted and maintained successful advisory programs note increased academic achievement, less vandalism, greater attendance, fewer alienated students, more student-centered learning, and a better climate permeating the building” (p. 2). Several researchers recognized that because of the inconsistent application of advisory groups, measuring their effectiveness is difficult and has not been done often (Anfara, 2006; Anfara 2006b; Brown & Anfara, 2001; Burkhardt, 1999).

Drawbacks to student advisory groups. Many authors presenting information about the implementation of middle school advisory programs recognized that while research suggests there are many positive outcomes of advisory programs, they remain one of the most difficult middle school programmatic components to implement and most problematic to sustain (Anfara, 2006; Anfara, 2006b; Brown & Anfara, 2001; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003b; Rottier et al., 2009). The ideal implementation of whole school advisory programs requires time during the school day. With NCLB regulations requiring additional emphasis on academic achievement, many middle schools have pushed social-emotional development to the side, despite the research that indicates students who feel connected and supported are more successful in school (Shulkind & Foote, 2009). Galassi et al. (2004) indicated that in schools that implemented advisory groups, staff often began enthusiastically, but as shifts in personnel occurred, the focus of the groups became unclear and advisories tended to vanish or become nothing more than an administrative homeroom period. Because the intention of advisory programs is to reach all students throughout the school, there is often difficulty with teacher comfort level and ongoing professional development to support staff with continued implementation of support groups (Rottier et al., 2009).

Approaches to program development. Research suggests various steps in the development of effective student mentoring programs. The exact steps and the exact number of steps that are followed vary from one study to the next. Although the number of steps and the specific definition of each step vary between studies, there are clear commonalities that guide the development of student mentoring programs. For instance, Drapen and Iserhagen (2005) defined two stages to developing a student support

program. The first stage included garnering the support and approvals from stakeholders, clearly defining the purpose, the goals and the lesson objectives for mentoring sessions, clearly identifying the target population, and identifying available resources. The second stage revolved around recruitment of participants and mentors, and the implementation of the program. In another study, Smith and Stormont (2010) suggested three steps essential to developing a student mentoring program: clearly define the target population and attend to the specific needs of the group, incorporate supportive research-based programs with consistent support from the school, and ensure sustainability over time. Torres-Rodriguez et al. (2010), in yet another study, identified five steps in the development of an effective student mentoring program to include: developing a student assistance team, developing of a system for identifying students in need of support, obtaining referrals develop action plans, developing assistance activities and strategies that target areas in need of support, and evaluating the effectiveness of the program.

Researchers that focus on developing student support groups, mentoring groups or advisory programs promote various elements that contribute to the groups' effectiveness. Among these are identifying a clearly stated target population (Smith & Stormont, 2011), setting clear goals for the program (Drappen & Iserhagen, 2005; Smith & Stormont, 2011; Torres-Rodriguez et al., 2010), establishing and maintaining support from school administration and other stakeholders (Smith & Stormont, 2011; Torres-Rodriguez et al., 2010), developing program activities designed to meet the specific needs of the students in the group (Sims, 2010; Smith & Stormont, 2011; Torres-Rodriguez et al., 2010), establishing regularly scheduled meeting times (Drappen & Iserhagen, 2005), conducting regular monitoring and adjusting to meet the specific needs of the students (Drappen &

Iserhagen, 2005; Sims, 2010; Smith & Stormont, 2011; Torres-Rodriguez et al., 2010), building into the program opportunities for celebrations and student recognition (Drappen & Iserhagen, 2005), and performing a formal evaluation of the program and its goals at the end of the defined timeline (Drappen & Iserhagen, 2005; Sims, 2010; Torres-Rodriguez et al., 2010).

To evaluate the effectiveness of mentoring programs, researchers have incorporated a variety of evaluative techniques. Drappen and Iserhagen (2005) examined quantitative data, looking at a before and after comparison of students' academic grades, students' attendance profiles, and office referrals for behavioral issues. They also explored qualitative data, seeking teacher feedback on student performance and behavior, as well as student self-assessment information. In research conducted by Sims (2010), activities were regularly reflected upon, and adjusted as needed to meet the needs of the student participants and meet the program's goals. Evaluation of the program was formative and on-going. Regular needs assessments were completed as the program was implemented. Quantitative data was also gathered to compare the impact of before and after participation. For this student attendance and student grades were examined.

Summary of literature. Middle school advisory programs are recognized as effective in supporting the various developmental needs of middle school students, especially students transitioning into the secondary setting. Students who participate in mentoring programs benefit from having an adult advocate who serves as a positive role model. The advisory program allows students to become a part of a group where they can form positive relationships and connections to a supportive learning environment. Effective programs for middle school students establish regular meetings that assist

students in developing academic and social-emotional skills via clearly developed lessons and activities that are designed to specifically meet the needs of the students in the group. These activities often include development of skills needed to succeed academically, such as: goal setting and monitoring, active listening, speaking, interpersonal communication, organization, and note-taking. Advisory group activities also include skills that promote social-emotional growth, including: character building, conflict resolution, anti-bullying, netiquette, and developing community awareness. Mentors should be aware of and recognize students for positive achievements through group and individual celebrations.

To evaluate the effectiveness of a student advisory program, on-going formal and informal assessments are needed. Evaluative data can be quantitative, including a pre- and post-intervention review of student grades, student attendance, and office referrals for disciplinary action. Additional evaluative information can be gathered through qualitative means via teacher accounts of student performance academically and behaviorally, and through student self-assessments.

Project Description and Goals

This project study examined the perceptions of sixth grade students transitioning into CMS from the elementary setting. The purpose of the study was to capture the thoughts and opinions of the students in order to gain a deeper understanding of how well students felt their needs were supported throughout the transition into middle school. Data analysis of student writing tasks and focus group interviews revealed that students felt CMS's orientation programs were effective in meeting their needs during the initial transition into the school. Many students stated the orientation programs made them feel "less anxious" about starting life in their new school and allowed them to clearly

understand the procedural expectations of the building. Throughout their responses, students indicated the school did an excellent job helping them to understand and acclimate to procedural expectations. While student responses were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences moving into middle school, students described the need for additional support related to social-emotional aspects of school and academic achievement as the year progressed.

In order to help students successfully negotiate social situations and meet academic expectations set forth by their teachers, I developed a facilitator's guide for student support groups. The intended goals for the student support groups are as follows:

1. Create a sense of belonging within the school community.
2. Allow students the opportunity to develop a positive, caring relationship with an adult in the school who can serve as an adult advocate for the student.
3. Provide students the opportunity to participate in various activities that will develop social and academic skills, enabling them to better handle a variety of aspects of middle school life.

Student advisory programs are recommended throughout the research on best practices in middle school as a key component of the middle school model and a key element to support students' developmental needs (Anfara & Brown, 2001; Burkhardt & Kane, 2005; George & Alexander, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Jackson et al., 2004; Knowles & Brown, 2000; Lousbury & Brazee, 2004; MacIver & Epstein, 1991; Manning & Bucher, 2001; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 2003; NMSA, 2010a; Rottier et al., 2009; Shulkind & Foote, 2009; Thompson & VanderJagt, 2001; Thompson & VanderJagt, 2002; Thompson, 2008; VanHoose et al., 2008). Traditional middle school advisories

consist of daily time embedded into students' schedules where every staff member is responsible for a small group of students. A designated staff member works closely with a small group of students, facilitating activities and meetings that target social and academic skill development.

The activities developed for this project are tailored to support the social-emotional development of young adolescents. They are also designed to emphasize academic skill sets required to succeed in middle school and beyond. The project contains lesson plans that are to serve as a guide for a support group facilitator. Plans are included for 15 sessions, seven in-school sessions and eight after-school sessions. Lesson plans contain learning goals, procedures and discussion points, suggestions for assessing the learning, and reflection tools. Reflection tools include elements for the facilitator and for students. By allowing the students the opportunity to reflect on the activity, facilitators will gain a deeper understanding of whether or not students have achieved the desired learning goal. Reflection activities will also allow the facilitator the ability to determine if additional support is required for an individual student. Because the support group is intended to meet the specific needs of the students in the group, lesson plans may be modified, adjusted, or changed as warranted.

Many of the lessons contain worksheets that may be utilized with students during group sessions. When designing the program, the intention was to have a structure for use at CMS that could also be adapted by other middle school educators. The flexibility of the lesson plans also makes them easily adaptable for use in the elementary setting with pre-transition support groups.

The current schedule at CMS does not support a traditional, whole-school advisory program. Therefore, during the first year of implementation, I intend to pilot the program for student support groups with a small group of approximately 10 incoming sixth graders. In order to work within the current schedule at CMS, student support groups will meet formally twice a month from October through May. The first meeting of the month will be held during school hours on the first Wednesday of each month. Meetings will be scheduled during rotating class periods. By scheduling meetings that rotate class periods, students will miss each class only one time throughout the school year.

Activities for in-school meetings focus on academic skills necessary for students to succeed in the classroom. These activities, while fun and engaging, allow students the ability to learn techniques and strategies that will address students' concerns over the increased amount and difficulty level of work in their middle school classes. During in-school meetings, students will identify qualities of a model student (Thompson & VanderJagt, 2002), as well as establish and monitor academic and personal goals (Rottier & Libby, 2005). Students will also practice communication and active listening skills, study skills, note-taking strategies, problem-solving skills, and decision making processes.

The second meeting of the month will be held for an hour after school on the third Wednesday of each month. Activity busses at CMS were reinstated beginning in September of 2011, therefore, increasing the availability of time for meetings after regular school hours. After school meetings will address aspects of social development. During one of the first after-school meetings, students will explore what they define as

their dream school (Thompson & VanderJagt, 2002). This activity will be the inspiration for meetings that follow. By examining the characteristics that make up a dream school, students will develop a plan of action for working toward making their school one through their own actions and behaviors. Students will receive support for planning and executing community service events, assist in recognizing other students and staff for making a difference in the life of another person, and develop and implement programs that address gossip, drama, and bullying.

Individual support sessions will be held during the second and fourth weeks of the month. These sessions are designed to be check-ins, to keep students on track in between formal meetings and to establish a positive rapport with the student on an individual basis. Individual sessions will be conducted during homeroom and/or lunch time. Check-in meetings will allow students the opportunity to discuss issues they may not feel comfortable discussing with the larger group, but may be impacting the student's ability to perform in class. Throughout the year, teachers will be asked to provide feedback on student progress. The feedback teachers provide will be utilized during these individual sessions and when helping students set academic and personal goals.

Several of the activities for the student support group sessions were inspired by Thompson and VanderJagt (2002). I had the pleasure of meeting Randy Thompson at the National Middle School Convention in 2004. His passion and attitude about working with middle school students was awe inspiring. His pro-middle school student message motivated educators to focus on developing and implementing activities and programs that foster positive relationships and support academic skill development, in a fun and engaging manner. Randy's presentation was so infectious it was hard not to try his

theories in practice. Because many of his theories on effective middle school teaming have been implemented with a twist at CMS and have been successful, his books that included advisory activities were the first that I turned to for inspiration. Aspects of seven advisory activities were adapted and re-defined to fit the specific needs of the student support groups. I contacted Incentive Publications via e-mail, sending them a complete copy of the activities as they appear in Appendix A. They graciously provided permission for their copyrighted material to be used within the confines of this project.

Activities may be modified and/or additional activities may be developed to meet the specific needs of each group of students. The results of the data analysis in this study led to the development of activities that target academic and social growth. Careful consideration was given to the inclusion of each activity. Each activity presents essential skills needed to succeed in a secondary environment, but in an engaging and fun approach. Furthermore, activities were developed with an eye on creating positive student-student relationships and positive advisor-advisee relationships. By participating in student support groups, students will not only gain insight into tools and techniques that will allow them to be successful in class, but they will develop skills that will allow them the opportunity to negotiate social situations more successfully. Ultimately, students will be exposed to a positive, trusting, and nurturing group that will provide them affirmation and guidance, allowing their social and academic needs to be better supported by their school.

Rationale

Throughout the research process, students transitioning into CMS repeatedly voiced the need for extra assistance adjusting to the increased academic demands of the

middle school and additional support negotiating social situations. In an effort to directly impact the areas identified by students, a program was needed that provides students with proactive strategies and a toolbox of skills that will enable them to successfully adjust to the expectations of secondary education.

The proposed student support groups are developed in line with research on middle school advisory programs. Effective advisory programs promote a small, caring community where meaningful relationships develop between advisor-advisees as well as the group as a whole (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003, 2010). A support group offers the opportunity for students to develop a sense of belonging in a new school environment. Under the watchful eye of an advisor, individualized attention can be paid to each student and specific success plans can be developed that target goals for that student's growth. The individualized attention provides the opportunity for close monitoring of academic progress, which will allow the facilitator the ability to immediately gauge when the student requires assistance or remediation in a particular class. Students in support groups, with the assistance of their advisor, establish, plan for, and monitor both academic and personal goals. Furthermore, effective support group activities promote interpersonal communication skills, positive decision making, problem solving, and other social skill building. In an effective advisory, these skills are strengthened through fun and engaging activities.

Research studies on the transition to middle school clearly note the potential for negative impact to student achievement, student esteem, and student behavior. However, within the body of research is evidence that schools that respond to and effectively support the developmental needs of the students have a greater potential to diminish the

negative effects of the transition. The success of this support program will be measureable by the reflections of the students in the group, the attainment of student established goals, students' academic performance, and by the students' ability to successfully negotiate social situations.

Project Implementation

Resources required for effective implementation of the student support groups described within this project study are identified within the following sections.

Potential Resources

Resources need to carry out the support groups include a clearly developed schedule for meeting times and dates. The proposed schedule is intended to make it easy for students to remember when group meetings are to occur. Student support groups will meet collectively twice a month on Wednesdays. The first meeting of the month will be scheduled for the first Wednesday of the month. The meeting will be held during school hours and rotate between class periods. The second meeting of the month will be held on the third Wednesday after-school.

A room within the school will be secured as a regular meeting location. The room will be decorated to be inviting, welcoming, and nonthreatening. Student work created during the group sessions will be hung on the walls. The location will also provide a place for students to display their proud moments.

Each student will need a black composition book to record her reflections. Students will complete a variety of handouts throughout the year. To teach organizational skills, students will be taught to tape or staple these worksheets into their notebooks.

Worksheets were developed and included with lesson plans. These need to be copied for students prior to group meetings.

Existing Supports

Support from various stakeholders is paramount to the potential success of the student groups. Support is needed from the building administration, the guidance department, the sixth grade teachers, and the parents of students invited to participate in groups. The sixth grade teachers will assist in providing the names of potential group members to the guidance counselors. Throughout the school year, the teachers will be asked to provide feedback on the performance of students in the different groups. Their genuine feedback is critical to guiding the development of student goals and student success plans.

In addition to school personnel, the support of the sixth grade students' parents is needed. Parents will be sent a letter informing them of their child's inclusion in the group, the purpose of the group, and a schedule for group meetings. Parents will be provided with contact information for the session facilitator, in the event they have questions or concerns as the year unfolds.

Finally, a commitment is needed from student participants. In order for the groups to be effective and truly meet the needs of the students, the students need to be willing to partake in the activities and commit to working with the advisor of the group. The activities are designed to be fun and engaging. Over time, they are also designed to encourage meaningful relationships between the students and the adult, as well as among students.

Potential Barriers

The proposed plan for the implementation of student support groups at CMS will require students to miss seven total class periods. Because they will rotate periods, students will miss each class only once during the school year. Teachers will have to give permission for students to attend an in-school meeting. After school meetings are contingent upon transportation remaining in place for the upcoming school year. With uncertainty surrounding school budgets, there is always a concern that budget cuts will impact programming. If CMS is subjected to budget cuts again, it is very possible that after hours transportation will be cut, resulting in the inability to implement the after school component of this project. Additionally, some parents may not see the benefits of a program of this nature, but will only fixate on the number of classes students will miss over the course of the school year. Therefore, they may not allow their child to participate in the support group. It is critical that parents be presented with enough information to see the benefits to the student participants.

Proposed Implementation and Timeline

Because the current schedule at CMS does not allow for a full-scale implementation of support groups for all sixth grade students, the proposed support group design and activities will be piloted during the first year of implementation with one group of approximately 10 students. The opinions and feedback of the participants will be utilized to make adjustments to activities as needed prior to implementation with multiple support groups. It is my hope that following the success of this small group, the two guidance counselors and additional teacher volunteers will be willing to supervise other student support groups in years to follow.

Akos (2004), when developing small student support groups, allowed students the first week of school to learn classroom procedures and the second week of school to learn school-wide procedures. Following these events, the teachers met during their common planning time to discuss students who were still demonstrating difficulty with the transition. Using this process as a model, teachers will be asked to use time during their team meeting period to develop a list of students who appear to be in need of additional support in the weeks following the initial transition into CMS. These students and any other students that the guidance counselors may feel are in need additional assistance will be considered for the support groups. A small group, of approximately 10 students, will be selected with the assistance of the guidance staff. During the pilot year, I will act as lead facilitator of the group.

To support the needs of as many students as possible, it is important to establish multiple groups within each team. Therefore, the goal following the pilot year is to incorporate two additional groups facilitated by the guidance counselors. This will allow CMS to have at least one student support group per team. Teachers will be offered the opportunity to volunteer to serve as advisors as well, which would increase the number of students able to be supported through groups. As the concept grows and students achieve success in and outside of the classroom, a plan of action for the implementation of advisories that will involve all students and all sixth grade teachers, as described throughout the review of the literature, can be explored.

Roles and Responsibilities

During the pilot year, the primary responsibility of implementation rests with me. Students will be selected based on the recommendations and input of the sixth grade

teachers and the two guidance counselors. I will contact the parents of these students to explain the premise, purpose, and benefits of the program. The calendar of dates will be distributed to all necessary students, parents, and personnel. Throughout the year, I will monitor the activities and modify them as needed, based on the specific needs of the group. Knowing that we will expand the support groups the following school year, I will support the guidance counselors so they feel they are adequately prepared to be facilitators of their own groups. The ultimate goal is to involve more teachers and students; therefore, if there are other staff members interested in being trained to facilitate a group, I will train them as well.

Project Evaluation

In order to determine the effectiveness of the student support groups, an evaluation that includes multifaceted formative and summative components will be conducted (Cook, 2010; Gamse, Millsap & Goodson, 2002). Since I will be the facilitator for the initial year of implementation of the student support groups, I will be responsible for conducting the program's evaluation throughout the school year.

When Smith and Stormont (2011) conducted their study on the implementation of school-based mentoring groups, they included a pre-post assessment and conducted on-going formative assessments. These researchers utilized student attendance, course grades, office disciplinary referrals, and teacher observations as pre-intervention data. Following the incorporation of student mentoring, Smith and Stormont examined the same sources of data for changes. A similar process will be utilized as one way of examining the effectiveness of the proposed support groups for students in transition. When students are selected to be a part of the initial groups, preliminary data will be

collected to serve as a baseline. This information will include first marking period attendance records, class grades, student discipline records, and teacher/counselor observations. Following the implementation of the support groups, the same information will be obtained. The effectiveness of the student support groups will be evidenced by limited student absences, improved student performance in classes, increased frequency of positive behavior in and outside of class, students' ability to positively interact with peers and adults, and narrative reports of student growth from teachers and counselors.

Formative evaluation data will also be examined throughout the year to determine the program's effectiveness. At the end of each support group session, the students will be asked to complete a closure activity referred to as "wrap it up." The wrap it up worksheet provides the facilitator immediate feedback on the activities conducted and if the activity's goals were achieved. The on-going formative assessment allows the facilitator the opportunity to change or modify activities based on the feedback of the group members. The feedback forms also allow the students the opportunity to provide the facilitator with topic areas they feel they need to bring up either privately or at group. Students also have the ability to provide input during their independent meetings. The narrative feedback students provide will be a very important part of the feedback process.

On-going monitoring of students' academic performance, behavior, and attendance will be performed and reviewed with students during the bi-weekly check-in sessions. Teachers will have the opportunity to provide insights and feedback in order to support student needs. The benefit of including on-going assessments is to enable the facilitator the ability to monitor and adjust strategies to lead to increases in student support. Activities conducted during the whole group session can be changed or modified

to meet the needs of the group or individual sessions can be tailored to support the individual needs of a particular student. Student participants could benefit from formative assessments because changes to the program can be made in a timely manner and can be responsive to the specific needs of the students in the group.

Throughout the year, the information collected from the on-going program evaluations will be shared with the building principal, the counselors and the teachers. These discussions will be specific to the program. They will help identify program strengths and weaknesses so necessary improvements can be made along the way. At the end of the school year, summative program evaluation information will be shared with the staff at a faculty meeting highlighting the program's strengths and/or areas in need of improvement. Based on the evaluations, a determination can be made by the building administration whether or not the program was effective and should be continued.

Another indication that the student support groups are effective would be teachers expressing interest in becoming a support group facilitator. The expansion of the support groups to full-scale advisory implementation would be the ultimate indication of the program's effectiveness.

Implications for Social Change

It is the mission of Walden University that its scholars seek to impact social change through the research studies they conduct. This project study addresses the need to impact social change by:

1. Adding to the scholarly research and literature that currently exists about the transition into middle school. This study also adds to the limited number of studies that involved students as direct participants, where their feedback and

opinions were collected through face-to-face interviews rather than through closed-response surveys.

2. Developing a research format and procedures that can easily serve as a model for future research studies. The questions and procedures can also be utilized as a model by other schools that are interested in obtaining information that will allow them to capture the opinions of their students in order to make programmatic improvements.
3. Developing a plan of action for the development of student support groups designed to support the developmental needs of the students in transition that can be replicated for use beyond the local setting in schools where there is not time available or built into the students' daily schedule for advisory.

Social Change at the Local Level

The design of this project study involved student participants who were eager to share their thoughts and feeling about issues that directly impacted them and their schooling. Student participants expressed feelings of validation and appreciation for being selected to offer their insights. They expressed great pleasure in knowing that someone was listening to what they had to say. The methods used in this project study opened the doors for students to serve on committees and in greater leadership and decision-making roles throughout the school community. The participants recognized the potential impact their opinions would have on programs at CMS, and took their responsibility as participants very seriously.

The product, a facilitator's guide for student support groups for students in transition, is a direct reflection of areas which were identified by students as needing

additional support. It also incorporates areas where students felt the school adequately supported them. Through implementation of the student support groups, there is an increased potential for students to successfully adapt to the expectations and rigors of the secondary environment. Additionally, students described great pleasure in having an adult at the school listen to and value their opinions. The use of the student support groups will provide a regular forum for students' voices to be heard by an adult advocate in the school.

Social Change - Far Reaching.

Middle schools across the nation annually welcome a new class into their learning environments. The literature review completed in section one presented evidence indicating the need for comprehensive transition programs to support the developmental needs of the students if they are to truly be successful. While this project was specifically designed to meet the needs of the students of CMS, the facilitator's guide can be adapted or used as a model for schools across the nation. Upon completion of this project study, I will take necessary steps with my local school officials to obtain permission to share this product with representatives of the National Middle School Association. This organization, with its more than 30,000 members, is an excellent vehicle for allowing this research and its product to be utilized by middle schools across the nation. Schools that elect to implement the student support group lesson plans may see positive impacts to student achievement and social development, particularly when these lesson plans are utilized with students transitioning into the middle school setting.

Conclusion

The data analysis for this research study indicated that students from CMS felt that their school effectively supported their needs to understand and master procedural knowledge. Students felt that orientation programs in place provide them the opportunity to learn processes and about the physical plant of their new school. Students reported that additional academic and social-emotional support was needed throughout the course of the year. The proposed project is facilitator's guide for student support groups, specifically designed to support the needs of students in transition. The support groups are designed to meet once a month during school hours and once a month after school hours. In-school meetings will focus on academic skill building and after school meetings will focus on social-emotional development. In between formal meetings, the group facilitator will meet individually with students to maintain focus on their academic and personal goals. Fifteen lesson plans were developed that incorporate skill building in a fun and engaging fashion.

Section 4: Reflections

Introduction

The previous sections detailed the research components of this project study. Section 4 will examine reflections on the research process, on the project that was developed as a result of the data analysis, and on the learning that has resulted. The project's potential impact on social change and possibilities for future research will also be discussed.

Inspiration for Study

Dealing with young people, I frequently hear students make statements such as, "My teacher doesn't understand me," or "I tried to tell her this, but she wouldn't listen to me." On a regular basis, I hear my students saying that they just want their voices and opinions to be heard. When I started reading the research on best practices in middle schools and creating supportive transition programs, the fact that most data involving students was collected through a multiple choice survey tool reinforced what the students were saying to me. The more information I read, the more I felt that we, as adults, often make decisions claiming they are in the best interests of the students. Although, I began to wonder, just how often were the students that the decisions impact directly involved in the decision making process?

Listening to the voices of the children we teach is powerful. They are well aware of what they like and dislike, and what they need to succeed and why. Taking the time to sit with the students in my school and really hear them not only empowered them, but was humbling to me. I found their insights and ideas refreshing. Much of what they had

to say about our school was an affirmation that we are making the right choices. They were not afraid of offering feedback to improve processes and procedures.

Students were the inspiration for my work on this study, and the work I do on a daily basis. This project was inspired by those children who felt they needed to be heard more clearly, so the adults in their lives recognize they have something important to offer. I value and appreciate those students who bravely stood up and spoke out in order to make me realize the importance of taking the time to actually hear their voices and listen to what they have to share.

Project Strengths

Following the focus group interviews, students expressed an overwhelming appreciation for someone taking the time to listen to what they had to say. The idea of student support groups puts a structure in place that allows students to be supported, heard, and validated on a regular basis. The activities that were designed directly reflect areas where students felt their school needed to provide additional support.

NMSA (2010) supports schools that implement developmentally appropriate strategies to facilitate student growth. The research on middle school model clearly articulates key components that make a middle school different from a junior high school. Middle schools are those that strive to meet the developmental needs of its students through its programs and structures. Paramount to the success of a middle school is the effective implementation of structures such as teaming and advisory programs. The support that students receive through programs of this nature can positively impact students' achievement and social-emotional development.

The research conducted with the students of CMS presented a need that exists within the school. As per student accounts, the school needs to provide additional support structures to assist students in transition with meeting academic and social expectations. Therefore, the development of student support groups will enable students to develop skills needed to succeed academically and socially. The student support groups will provide students with additional techniques and strategies that will allow them to succeed in and outside of class.

Each time I examine the 15 activities created for the facilitator's guide and share them with colleagues for feedback, I am increasingly excited about their potential impact on the students. Each activity took several hours to create from start to finish. Many required multiple drafts in order to adequately capture the vision in my head. Trial runs of several lessons, or components of lessons, were completed with classroom groups to ensure that the directions were clearly presented. The feedback from the staff and students who helped me iron out the kinks was very positive.

When writing each plan, I tried to include enough detail so anyone picking up the plan would have a clear understanding of the lesson's goals, the materials needed, and the procedures to follow. Each lesson provides the facilitator with additional elements that can be added to enhance the presentation. When formatting each lesson, I reflected on the following questions: What do I want the students to learn as a result of this activity? What process or procedures will I follow that will allow that learning to occur? At the end, how will I know the students achieved the desired learning? These questions allowed me to remain focused on the intended goals for a specific activity.

The sequence of the lessons was also deliberate. As I reflected on what skills students need to be successful in class, I forced myself to consider the progression of skill development. Each of the lessons has a connection to a future lesson. There are clear ties that bind activities together. The skills are meant to build upon each other and, ultimately, result in a community service project that incorporates all of the skills developed. The in-school sessions reinforce academic skill building and goal setting, something that most students do not know how to do. The after school sessions involve social skills, while allowing students to participate in enjoyable game-like activities. These plans can be modified or adjusted depending upon the specific needs of the young people in the group. I hoped to create a balance between academic skills and social skills within the different lessons, and I feel I have successfully accomplished that goal.

The lesson plans genuinely reflect my personality and philosophies on instruction. Students need to be engaged in fun-filled activities that have an underlying message for the greatest impact to be achieved. I enjoyed creating each of the activities, discussing the ideas with colleagues, testing components to work out the bugs, and seeing the final product in its entirety.

Project Limitations and Remediation

Although the 15 lesson plans are well designed and thoughtfully presented, there are only 15 lesson plans - which means only 15 formal meetings with the students. Much of the research on student advisory groups in middle schools promotes whole-school programs that take place “at a designated time within a school day with some frequency” (Galassi et al., 2004, p. 2). The idea behind a middle school advisory program is to build in time during the school day where every student is assigned to an advisor and a group,

and every staff member is responsible for a student. At CMS, several factors prevent the implementation of a daily advisory program. First, the daily schedule does not have time built into it for an advisory period. Changing the schedule would require initial approval from the superintendent. Because the teachers' contract specifies an amount of student contact hours allowed, implementation of a full-scale advisory program would require changes to contract language. A smaller scale advisory program is being suggested within this project for these reasons. Clearly, a small-scale advisory program will not impact as many students as a whole-school program.

The hope is that the small-scale implementation will be highly successful, thus resulting in a larger scale implementation in the future. Once the small-scale advisory program is in place and data illustrating the program's success is available, I will be able to approach various stakeholders to present the benefits of the advisory program. With the assistance and support of central office administration, school administration, and teacher leaders, the idea of promoting a school-wide advisory program can be pursued with the teachers' union.

When developing the lessons, I also attempted to include possibilities for incorporating technology. At the time the lessons were developed, all links were active and available. Because many videos suggested to supplement activities were found on You Tube, and the site is ever-changing, the videos may not be accessible in the future, requiring facilitators to search for supplemental materials.

Scholarship

The journey down the road of a doctoral degree is a challenging one, complete with moments of enlightenment and moments of frustration. The research process

requires a high degree of dedication, determination, and perseverance. Throughout this adventure, I have learned several important lessons about conducting research and scholarship:

1. The world of research can be lonely. It is easy to get lost in the millions of research articles in journals and on the web. It is equally easy to quickly become knee deep in a stack of books, and nose hard pressed to their pages. However, while reading the research is important, so is having the opportunity to engage in conversation with others about the concepts that appear in print. I found it was important to truly understanding the material, as well as to maintain my sanity, to engage in discussions with colleagues. Through my research, I have been afforded the opportunity to not only engage in scholarly discussion with my colleagues, but with several of the authors whose works I read.
2. Works cited pages and reference lists are powerful research tools. Throughout the research process, I often found myself against a brick wall, uncertain where to look next for information after reading an excellently written article. By examining the reference list at the end of the work, I often found my next avenue to explore.
3. There is an abundance of valuable information available on any given topic. Every time I thought I exhausted a search, my search engine located ten more articles about the same topic. Some of the articles I found when I thought I was finished, added new depth to the information I previously uncovered.

4. When I first began my doctoral program, I did all that I could to avoid quantitative research studies. I would read and reread these articles, and have absolutely no concept what was being discussed because I did not understand the statistics being thrown around. Through my coursework, I now have a better understanding of this type of research. Additionally, I often reflected on the importance of writing a research paper in such a way that the audience sees the document as user friendly and engaging. If an article was the least bit confusing, I would find myself moving on to find something that conveyed similar concepts in a more explicit fashion. If the written document is user friendly and engaging, it is more likely to be utilized by others and be of value within its intended learning community. If the document is difficult to read, it may be tossed aside, making the research that was completed of no value.
5. Educators owe it to their students to stay informed of best practices and instructional techniques to provide students with the best possible educational outcomes available. In a column written for the National Staff Development Council, DuFour (2003) called implementing best practices, specifically collaboration, a “professional obligation” (p. 71). In the article, DuFour related a personal anecdote that ties to the obligation we as educators have to implement research supported best practices. He explained how his sister, in the late 1980s, decided to have vision correction surgery. The process took 6 months for one eye to sufficiently recover before beginning her other eye. In the year 2000, DuFour went for vision correction surgery himself. After 10 minutes, an afternoon of sleep, and several days, he had 20-20 vision in both

eyes. If DuFour, or any of us for that matter, walked into a doctor's office to be told that the doctor still uses the old procedures because "that's how I've always done it," we would run for the hills. Yet, in education, we hear teachers regularly dismiss best practices for that reason. DuFour's message is a powerful one, "We should be just as intolerant of educators' inattention to best practice as we would be of the eye surgeon" (p. 72). It is irresponsible for educators to ignore best practices and research in favor of comfort.

Project Development

When I reviewed the scripts of my interviews with the students, I was pleased with the fact that the students felt the orientation programs did an effective job making them feel comfortable in their new school. Procedurally, CMS appears to do fine job supporting the physical needs of its students. As the students told their stories, it became clear that more needs to be done as the year progresses to support the sixth graders in meeting the expectations of the secondary environment.

Throughout the research on the transition to middle school, it became painfully clear that if the students were not adequately supported, they could demonstrate losses in academic achievement and negative impacts to their personal development. In order to allow students to make positive strides, I needed to develop a project that would allow the students to feel supported. As much as I would love to implement a full-scale advisory program, I realized the barriers to implementation and the current structure in place at CMS would have been too large a hurdle to jump and no one would get the help needed. Therefore, implementing something over which I have control and can garner support as the program unfolds will more likely result in greater supports for the students.

When developing the lesson plans, the most difficult choice was how to narrow down all of the skills students need to succeed in middle school to the limited number of lesson plans that would be included in the final product. Over the years, I have had many conversations with sixth grade teachers about what skills the students lack when they transition to the middle school. I reflected on these conversations, and brainstormed those that I could address and build on over time. I could easily have developed enough plans for an entire school year, but recognized the limitations of the schedule at CMS as my greatest barrier. To determine how many sessions I could reasonable hold, I examined the calendar. I took into consideration the fact that I did not want students missing instructional time and wanted to capitalize on the fact that after school bussing was available. I strategically mapped out meetings that would allow me to formally meet with students every other week. Casual check-ins could easily be added for the remaining weeks, allowing me to see the students in group at least once a week.

Once I had the skills mapped out that I wanted to focus on developing, the lesson plans came easily. I brainstormed then developed plans that reflected my vision for engaging students in fun, skill-based lessons, and put my own twists on several activities presented in *Fire Up for Learning!* (Thompson & VanderJagt, 2001). After having several personal conversations with Randy Thompson, I knew he would be excited by my new versions of his ideas. I did not expect that when I went to share the results of my efforts, I would learn of his untimely passing. Immediately, I contacted Incentive Publications via e-mail to share my work, and obtain their permission to continue. My e-mail contained all of the activities as they appear in Appendix A. I felt it was necessary to allow them to see how I intended to use the ideas from Randy's work and make them into

my own. As I waited for a response from the publisher, I hoped that they would see the value in my adaptations and that I would be able to honor Randy's memory by presenting my project within this study. Luckily, Incentive Publications granted me permission to present my lesson plans as they appear in Appendix A. I am truly thankful to Incentive Publications for their support of my work.

Leadership and Change

Throughout history, the role of the educational leader has evolved with the needs of the society. In the early 1900s, schools operated with Frederick Taylor's principles of scientific management in mind (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004). Taylor's goals were simply to maximize worker productivity; therefore, the role of the school leader was one of a manager who managed the building and fixed problems as they developed.

School leadership then moved in the direction of a bureaucratic approach, where there was a clearly delineated chain of command, the school principal was the sole person in charge and everyone reported directly to him (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004). Many Americans see the role of a leader as an individual in charge (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). The leader is the one to "solve our problems because they not only have the answer – they are the answer" (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 1).

The stipulations of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) have resulted in communities and school leaders being forced to rethink what effective school leadership is and what it looks like. Hord (2004) stated that the principal's role as "all-wise" and "all-knowing" must be transformed into a role where "administrators along with teachers must be learners: questioning, investigating, and seeking solutions for

school improvement” (p. 8). Gone are the days of the administrator as manager and sole decision maker. DuFour and DuFour (2006) commented that, “no one individual could possibly have the skills, wisdom, and stamina to be the sole source of leadership in a school” (p. 4). Modern school leaders must be willing to accept the leadership role as one who nurtures and supports the growth of both students and staff.

Senge (2006) and Sergiovanni (2005) believed that organizations will only truly be successful if all of its many parts are working collaboratively to impact the organizational structure. Modern school leaders need to think beyond controlling what and how people perform their jobs, but instead think of how they can provide for growth and development within the community of learners.

In the realm of middle level leadership, Jackson and Davis (2000) called for middle level leaders that are “change agents” (p. 156), who develop a shared belief system and are able to “continually draw on the experience of school staff members and others to enable the organization to behave more intellectually” (p. 146). Through distributed leadership, the members of the organization develop a vested interest in making and sustaining improvements in the educational arena. NMSA (2003, 2010) stated effective leaders of middle level schools display courageous, collaborative characteristics of leadership which allow them to nurture and sustain effective instructional programs and practices. “Courageousness in leadership addresses the necessity to step outside the box and take chances to help the organization establish appropriate and defensible goals” (Anfara et al., 2008, p. 1). These leaders meet the challenges of their day with enthusiasm and excitement, creating a climate and culture that is inspiring and motivating. As a collaborative leader, participation by stakeholders is

an important consideration in the decision making process (Anfara et al., 2008). By involving stakeholders in the process, the leader is building support for long-term, continuous improvement (NMSA, 2003).

As a middle level leader, I have numerous responsibilities to the students, the staff, and the community. I believe in the descriptions of effective leaders as presented by Senge, Sergiovanni, Hord, Marzano, and R. DuFour and R. DuFour. A modern school leader must look beyond oneself and inspire others. The ability to influence others to develop and sustain a community where continuous improvement is the norm, is valued and is the responsibility of all stakeholders is the sign of an effective leader. Effective leaders establish clear goals and support the efforts of those on the team in meeting the expectations. At the heart of all decisions is improving student achievement.

A leadership role in 2011 presents challenges previous generations of school leaders could never have dreamed possible. Never before have school leaders been asked to do so much with so little support and resources. Today's leaders are expected to raise student achievement scores so high, support and implement staff development that will allow staff to perform at the highest standards possible, design programs that will support child development, and squash bullying and harassment in school and in electronic forums that impact student performance and school climate (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). It is a difficult and challenging time to be a leader, but also a time where effective and inspirational leaders are needed, and in effective leadership is great reward. I am proud to call myself a school leader, and I am willing to accept the challenges in front of me in order to facilitate positive, memorable learning experiences that will allow our children to develop the 21st-century skills they will need to compete in an ever changing world.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

As an educator, I regularly discuss the concept of life-long learning with my colleagues and encourage teachers to stay abreast of theories, best practices, and effective practices that will improve student achievement. I profess the benefits of life-long learning to my students, who being between the ages of 10 and 14, think that I am absolutely out of my mind because I am “still in school.” I am a believer in walking the walk, not just talking the talk. I lead by example, attending the conferences I would like to see my teachers attend. I share research articles with people that I think will find value in the information. I find resources teachers and students can use to facilitate learning. I read, and read, and read to learn about what others are doing across the nation that is allowing them to be successful in their schools.

The idea of obtaining a doctorate regularly crossed my mind. There have been many special women in my life who have motivated and inspired me to become a female educational leader. Growing up, the field of leadership, as I saw it, was predominantly made up of men. To see these women in a position of influence, in positions where they were able to effectively make a difference in the lives of other people, inspired me to want to do the same. I was certain that obtaining a doctoral degree was another way of advancing the groundwork of the women in leadership roles before me.

When a colleague approached me with the desire to enroll in a program, I saw it as my opportunity to fulfill another dream, and maybe even be an inspiration to a future generation. The process has been much more challenging than I imagined. I have enjoyed the reading and the learning, but often, finding the time to pull it all together was a hurdle. When I began my degree, life was more flexible. At that time, it was me, my

husband, our cat and our two dogs. During the first semester of the program, we learned I was pregnant with twins. Needless to say, there were days where I was uncertain if I had it in me to keep up with the work. My family has made sacrifices of all kinds so I could continue to fulfill this dream. My family and my colleagues inspired me and encouraged me to see my study through, knowing it was a goal I wanted and needed to achieve.

I will always be a life-long learner. I enjoy the opportunity to explore new ideas that will benefit my students. I love the ability to participate in PLCs with colleagues as we grapple with improving student achievement. I look forward to attending conventions that are geared toward middle school educators, maybe someday presenting at one of them. As a result of this process, I attended the National Association of Middle School's National Convention, which I found to be one of the best forums for middle level educators. Through my initial course work, I examined PLCs, and was fortunate to attend a 3-day workshop with Rick DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker, a workshop that has had a tremendous impact on my vision for middle school teaming. The pursuit of this degree has allowed me to encounter the works of many researchers and practitioners. I look forward to the opportunity to see these people in the future when the opportunity presents itself.

My relentless pursuit of education, and a lot of support from my loved ones, enabled me to see my dream of attaining this degree through to completion. My next adventure as a life-long learner begins with the completion of this degree.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

When I began teaching in 1997, my mentor took a well-worn piece of paper from the corner of her desk blotter, photocopied it, and handed it to me, advising me to keep it

somewhere prominent so I could re-read it often. I read the scribbled words regularly, reminding myself of my responsibilities as an educator. Though the image has faded some, the message is still powerful. The words, written by Haim Ginott (1972), read as follows:

I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated or a child humanized or de-humanized. (p. 15)

It was through this quote that I first came to realize the power I held as an educator.

While I held the paper in my hands, I reflected on my experiences as a student, and a few experiences that fit each component of Ginott's quote, both the positive and the negative: the high school guidance counselor who told me to forget my dreams because I would never amount to anything, the three teachers who chipped in to pay for my senior prom ticket because they knew the cost of the ticket might have prevented me from attending, the English teacher who embarrassed and belittled her students that came to class unprepared, the activities advisors who allowed me to develop leadership skills and inspired me to persevere, the college advisor who informed me that I would never teach because my GPA was a tenth of a point too low, the alternate route supervisor who acknowledged and encouraged me as a "natural." I can comfortably say that all of these experiences, and many others, have contributed to me becoming the educator I am today.

Society's most valuable possession is entrusted to educators for 8 hours a day. The children deserve an educational experience that is second to none. They deserve to go to school in an environment where learning and people are valued. The experiences students have on a daily basis contribute to their individual development. As an educator, it is impossible to say which interaction or when a particular occurrence in or outside of class will impact the life of a child. So educators need to treat every moment with care.

Aside from my love of learning, my other obsession is with Walt Disney World. I always joked with colleagues and family that if given the opportunity to complete a doctoral program, my dissertation was going to focus on how schools should be more like Disney World. Perhaps it is still a project I will pursue in the future. One of the many aspects of the Disney philosophy that impresses me most is the idea that every day, every guest experience, should be treated as magical. It is the obligation of the Disney World employees to make each guest feel welcome, feel special, and feel the magic of the experience. If educators also embraced this belief system, children would be excited about their learning environments and would look forward to the learning opportunities presented to them daily.

I have come to realize that as an administrator, Ginott's quote carries even more truth. Within my daily decisions, actions, and reactions, I am setting the tone for how others will then behave. My actions are directly related to the climate of our learning community. Through my work on this project, I have learned that I must set aside time to listen to the students. If they are truly at the heart of educational decisions, they must have an active voice at some point in the decision-making process. Children have one opportunity to obtain their education, and the power to make that a positive experience

has been placed in my hands. I see it as my responsibility to ensure that every day a child walks through the doors to my school it is like walking down Main Street USA and seeing Cinderella's Castle for the first time.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

Over the years, I have played a role in developing or redefining classroom curriculum. As a teacher, I regularly participated in curriculum projects in order to make changes that would positively impact the learning experience for my students. When developing the project for this research study, I knew I was designing something bigger than a lesson for my classroom. The impact of the project needed to be large enough that the students would feel supported, and achieve greater levels of success than if my project did not exist.

I take great pride in the work that I do day in and day out. I often obsess over things so that I know when something goes out into the public and it has my name on it, it is something that I can stand by proudly. The activities developed for the support groups as they appear in Appendix A are no exception to this rule. Every plan took hours to create, consider, re-think, re-examine, and finalize. The steps for each activity and the sequencing of one activity to the next took days. As I set the activities on the dining room table, I shuffled and re-shuffled as I considered the best possible way to build skills over time. Working with students, I know they often feel that lessons are done in isolation. They do not always see the connection between what they do in September and what they do in May. Not only did I want the students to see a connection from the first activity to the last, I wanted them to be able to see the connection to their classrooms and their lives.

The skills that are presented can positively impact them in the classrooms and in their social situations.

In the course of developing the plans, I found myself yearning to be back in a classroom where I could implement these activities with students. As an assistant principal, I often only have the opportunity to interact with students after they have a problem or they have broken a rule. By implementing advisory groups, my hope is that through these proactive measures that are specifically designed to address areas where students specifically indicated they needed additional support, I can affect change on a larger scale within the school setting.

Project's Potential Influence on Social Change

Walden University defines social change as, “a deliberate process of creating and applying ideas, strategies, and actions to promote the worth, dignity, and development of individuals, communities, organizations, institutions, cultures, and societies” (Ed. D. Program Candidate Handbook, 2010, p. 5). The results from this process include improvements for the individuals and communities involved.

In a politically driven educational system, one where unrealistic expectations exist of 100% of students being proficient in language arts literacy and math by 2014 (NCLB, 2002), it is easy to forget that the behind the statistics that are thrown around to reflect the efforts of public schools are real people, children. These children depend on their teachers and school leaders to provide them with a top notch education that will allow them to be competitive in a 21st - century global marketplace. While politicians and law makers argue about financing schools and what elements make up effective school reform models, the real focus of education, the children, is often forgotten.

Throughout discussions and battles surrounding education and reform, the voices of the children are often silenced and unheard. By listening to the voices, the thoughts, the opinions, and the perspectives of the young people at CMS, one barrier has already been broken down and change can occur that takes into consideration the needs of the students from their own perspectives.

As noted throughout the review of the literature, the transition to middle school is a very difficult time for many students, and the setbacks they suffer throughout this period can be detrimental to their future successes. The development of a tool that supplements effective practices already in place at CMS will increase the possibility of a successful transition into the middle school setting. The development of proactive advisories that support areas where students expressed the need for additional supports, as discussed in the findings section, is a necessary and responsible strategy to ensure student success and promote the development of the students within the school community.

Possibilities for Future Research

The goal of this project study was to capture the thoughts and opinions of the students transitioning from elementary school into CMS to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions of how their school does or does not support their developmental needs as they experience the transition. As a case study, the data gathered directly reflected the feelings of students from one school in the northeast region of the United States. As a result of the findings and conclusions drawn in this study, the following are recommendation for future research in the area of middle school transition:

1. This study focused on one site. Replicate the study with more than one location to allow for greater generalizability.
2. For ethical reasons, students with disciplinary profiles were excluded from the focus group selection process. These students may have different perspectives on how middle schools can better support their needs, ultimately resulting in less disciplinary infractions. Future research could involve this population.
3. As it happened, the participant selection process for focus group interviews resulted in no students with special needs selected to participate in the focus group sessions. In an effort to ensure there was no favoritism in the selection of student participants, all students affiliated with a particular team were placed on the roster regardless of educational needs. Students with special needs are another group who may have differing perspectives on ways their school can support them as they transition into middle school. Future research could involve this population.
4. This study focused on students who transitioned as a group from the elementary to the middle school. Another population worthy of consideration is the students who transfer into the middle school setting from another district or region to gain a deeper understanding of how their needs are being supported.
5. To delve further into the site for this case study, several specific students could be selected to monitor throughout the transition and for the duration of the school year in order to examine effective practices that support the

developmental needs of the students in transition, particularly paying attention to how academic development is supported.

The findings of this study support that of previous middle school research that explored the transition into middle school. Because CMS was implementing research supported best practices throughout the school and developed programs that specifically targeted supporting students as they transitioned into sixth grade, the challenges students faced were not necessarily with the transition itself, but with the academic expectations of the secondary environment in contrast to the expectations in the elementary setting as the school year progressed.

Conclusion

When I entered CMS as the Assistant Principal in 2004, it became evident quickly that students transitioning into the middle school setting needed additional assistance acclimating to expectations of the secondary environment. As I began to research effective practices in middle schools across the nation, I found an abundance of information that, when properly implemented, would effectively support our students, allowing them the opportunity to succeed in middle school. After making a variety of changes to the transition programs in place, a reduction in disciplinary referrals and an increase in student performance gave the appearance that CMS was effectively supporting the students developmental needs as they transitioned from the elementary setting. However, absent from the information were the opinions and feelings of the young people experiencing the transition.

Through this case study, the perspectives of the adolescents transitioning into CMS were captured. Using focus group interviews and anonymous writing samples, the

students were able to provide feedback on how they felt their school supports their various needs. The data analysis revealed students felt CMS's transition programs were effective at allowing them to fully understand the procedural aspects of their new school. Students indicated, however, that as the year progressed they felt the need for additional academic and social support structures. As a result of these findings, a plan was developed for support groups and a facilitator's guide developed containing activities that target the academic and social needs of students in transition.

As an educator, my interest has always been and always will be to go above and beyond to provide students the opportunity to succeed in school. Every student has a right to an education, and it should be the best possible education available. In my hands, I hold the future of hundreds of children each school year. I owe it to them to do all that is within my power to allow them the opportunity to learn. If providing additional support is necessary to allow a child to succeed in school and I have the ability to make the changes that will allow a child to succeed, I feel I have an obligation to make it so. The students of CMS have already started to reap the benefits of my research, and I will do all that is within my power to continue to allow that to be the case.

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A Facilitator's Guide for Student Support Groups



Kelly A. Rappa

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Facilitator's Guide



Background & Inspiration

Annually, 88% of public school students transition from an elementary school into the middle school setting (National Middle School Association & National Association of Elementary School Principals [NMSA & NAESP], 2002). In elementary school, students typically had one teacher in one classroom, with one set of rules and expectations (Cook, MacCoun, Muschkin & Vigdor, 2007; NMSA & NAESP, 2002). Because students were in one location all day, if the student needed a book, a notebook, or a pencil, it was within close reach, either in their desk or their cubby on the side of the classroom. Often elementary school students were provided time for recess, allowing the opportunity for students to expend energy and socialize with friends (Pellegrini & Smith, 1993). Physical education class focused on the development of motor skills and interpersonal skills through fun, game-like activities, including dance, gymnastics, kickball, or other games created by the teacher that taught fitness in a fun way (Rink & Hall, 2008). Class work and homework were manageable and could usually be completed with enough time to go outside and play with other children in the neighborhood (Erlbach, 2003). After five or six years in an elementary setting, many students make the move to secondary education: middle school.

The transition to middle school comes at a developmentally challenging stage in the life of the young adolescent (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Knowles & Brown, 2000; National Association for Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2006; NMSA, 2003, 2010). Not only are students expected to meet increased academic demands of the middle school,

they are expected to understand the expectations and procedures of multiple teachers and to maintain a clear sense of organization always mindful of bringing the right book or notebook from their locker to the right class (NMSA & NAESP, 2002). Students in many middle schools are expected to eat lunch in a relatively short period of time and return to the rigors of their classes. Physical education class, for which students are now expected to change their clothes in front of their peers, no longer resembles the casual, game oriented physical education courses of the elementary school. When students arrive home, balancing the demands of homework assignments and projects with a life outside of school can present another challenge (Erlbach, 2003; NMSA & NAESP, 2002).

Middle school is a time of change. The transition to middle school brings a significant change to the academic structure and organization of learning. Throughout the middle school years, students also undergo significant physical and social development. A growing body of research indicates schools that support the developmental needs of the students in transition through comprehensive transition plans and supportive learning environments can reduce the negative effects of the transition (Akos & Martin, 2003; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Barber & Olsen, 2004; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Midgley & Urdan, 1992; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 2003, 2010; Perkins & Gelfner, 1995).

In order for students in this transitional stage of their educational careers and their lives to achieve success, schools need to act with the special developmental needs of the young adolescent in mind. Knowles and Brown (2001) remarked, "If we want students to be successful in middle school, we must pay attention to the changes in their development, understand the challenges that lie ahead of them, and listen to what they say" (p. 4). For students to be successful in middle school, research supports implementing developmentally appropriate strategies to meet their various needs. Furthermore, a comprehensive well-designed transition plan is recommended to support the needs of the students transitioning from one level of education to the next (Koppang, 2004; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000; Mullins & Irvin, 2000).

In 2004, I was appointed as an assistant principal of a middle school. I watched my students enter our school from the elementary setting and flounder. They struggled

with understanding new procedures, processes, and protocols. The students, who were used to one teacher and one classroom all day long, were now expected to succeed with seven different teachers, in seven different classrooms, with seven different sets of expectations. The first days of school were often accompanied by tears, and lots of them! It was evident to me that our school needed to reflect on how we were supporting the students' developmental needs through our transition programs and processes. As the research noted, a comprehensive transition plan was the key to supporting our students transitioning from the elementary setting.

Over the next few years, we examined and changed our processes to better serve the students. We adjusted our orientation programs to be more thorough and spread out over time. The orientations now include: a visit to the elementary school in the spring by me and the sixth grade counselor to discuss what to expect over the summer and the first few days of school, the students' visiting our school with their fifth grade classes the following week to learn from our students what it's like to be in sixth grade, a parent program that addresses the differences between elementary and middle school, and a half-day summer orientation program with their team, where students have the opportunity to meet their teachers and new classmates and learn about the procedures and expectations of their new school. Based on anecdotal information from staff, reduced disciplinary issues, and apparent increases in student performance, it appeared the programs were having a positive impact on the students in transition. However, absent from the information was the feedback from the students themselves. In an effort to recognize how the students felt the school was supporting their needs throughout the transition, a research study was completed.

Based on the case study examining student perspectives of the transition into Central Middle School, this facilitator's guide for student support groups was developed. Students overwhelmingly felt that the changes to the orientation programs were effective in making them feel less anxious about the procedural aspects of the middle school. They described feeling comfortable with locks and lockers, with finding their classes, with being a part of a team, and with knowing the rules and expectations. In general, students provided very positive feedback about the orientations conducted. Although students felt

supported during the initial transition, they expressed the need for additional academic and social support as the year progressed. Students repeatedly reported feeling ill-prepared to meet the academic expectations of the middle school. Student after student indicated that the amount of and rigor of the homework was something with which they struggled. Additionally, students expressed the need for additional support negotiating social situations.

The idea for student support groups is not new. Middle schools across the nation have utilized variations of advisory programs for years. While Central Middle School has interdisciplinary teams to support the students in small learning communities, the school currently does not utilize advisory. Therefore, this guide was developed to directly address the academic and social concerns of the students and provide a plan that can be easily followed or adapted by the facilitator.

Benefits of Advisory/Support Groups

Research on middle school model supports the need for advisory programs that support the developmental needs of the young adolescent. The National Middle School Association (2010) calls for middle schools that support meaningful relationships, allow for the growth of students' developmental needs, and support rigorous learning environments. They suggest the use of advisory programs to achieve those goals. Effective advisory programs are tailored to support the developmental needs of the students in the group. The lessons or mini-lessons are designed to be fun and engaging, yet meaningful. Advisory groups should be small (10-15 students per adult) in order to establish and promote a caring community and meaningful relationships. The smallness of the group allows the facilitator the opportunity to individualize plans for student growth. Lessons can focus on academic skills (e.g. note taking, study skills, organizational skills, research skills, active listening) and social skills (e.g. interpersonal communication, decision making, team building, development of self-esteem, social awareness). During advisories, students can learn to set, monitor, and achieve personal and academic goals. The use of support groups allow for targeted support in a proactive, caring forum. For students in transition, student support groups can provide the additional

academic and social support that will allow students an increased potential to be successful in the secondary setting.

Why 15 Lesson Plans?

Because Central Middle School does not have dedicated in-school time for advisories, another plan for implementation of student support groups was necessary. Additionally, traditional advisory programs involve all students and many, if not all, educators in the school setting. Cognizant that involving all students would not be possible initially, a small-scale plan was developed that will be implemented with one group of approximately 10 students. The following year, the number of support groups will expand to involve each of the guidance counselors and any other teacher interested in facilitating a group. Once success is seen on small-scale, necessary steps for involving the whole grade level can be explored.

After the first month of school, sixth grade teachers and counselors will be asked to consider students that are still experiencing difficulty with the transition. These students will be invited to participate in the support groups. Support groups will operate from October – May. The initial goal when planning for implementation was to find a way to meet with students at least once a week, while ensuring students do not miss too much instructional time. The implementation plan provides for two formal meetings a month, one in-school and one after school, to be scheduled during the first and third week of each month. The seven in-school sessions will be conducted during rotating class periods, so that student will only miss one period from each class throughout the school year. Attendance at in-school sessions is also contingent upon the student receiving teacher permission to miss class. All in-school sessions will focus on developing academic skills. The eight after school sessions emphasize social and emotional development.

The facilitator must find time to individually conference with students in between whole group meetings in order to maximize the possibility of student success. Conferences are meant to be informal check-ins that provide a time for discussions about individual academic progress or personal issues interfering with the student's ability to succeed in school. The facilitator can use homeroom time, lunch time, or other available

down time in the student's schedule to make personal connections. While it is important for the student to reflect on how she thinks she is doing in class, it is also important for the facilitator to obtain information from the student's teachers in order to help guide goal development and conversations about making improvements in the classroom.

About the Activities

Each activity was developed with an eye on supporting the academic and social development of the students transitioning in to the middle school environment. Several of the activities were inspired by the work of Randy Thompson and Dorothy VanderJagt (2002). I met Randy at the National Middle School Convention in Philadelphia in 2004. His passion for middle school students was inspiring and his attitude infectious, so much so that I forced my husband to bring me to Nashville the following year to hear Randy speak again. His message was very pro-middle school and pro-student. I found myself sharing Randy's message with any teacher that would listen. In fact, his presentation was so inspirational that I worked with a colleague to bring Randy to our school to speak to our teachers. Randy was a true supporter of middle school students. In his presentations he would demonstrate how to keep advisories and team activities fun and engaging, yet have an underlying skill-based message for students. He would inspire educators to focus on how activities will foster positive relationships and allow the students to grow. As I was completing my work on this project, I found myself excited to reach out to him to share my spin on some of his activities, only to learn he passed away suddenly. After learning of Randy's passing, I reached out to Incentive Publications via e-mail to share my work, and obtain their permission to continue. I e-mailed all of the activities that follow. As I waited for a response from the publisher, I hoped that they would see the value in my adaptations and that I would be able to honor Randy's memory by presenting my project within this study. Fortunately, Incentive Publications granted me permission to present my lesson plans as they appear here. I am truly thankful to Incentive Publications for their support of my work. While Randy will never have the opportunity to see my work completed, I sincerely hope that I have done him proud by continuing to promote his unwavering support of middle school students.

Teacher & Parent Involvement

A program of this nature would not be truly effective without the support of the teachers and the students' parents. Teachers need to be a part of the process to select students that they feel are in need of additional support services. While Central Middle School does not currently have the ability to support advisory groups for all students, perhaps over time, the teachers will see the positive impact of the support groups and they will expand to support more students. Every teacher interested in supporting the transition groups will be encouraged to do so in order to extend the level of involvement.

It is also important for parents to know about and understand why their child is a part of the support groups. As children start to develop a level of independence, they tend to push away their parents. While students think they know everything and don't need their parents' support, they actually need them more than ever. The facilitator can be the link between home and school that the students need to truly be successful.

Sample Letters

The following letters can be modified to notify staff of information pertaining to students involved in support groups, meeting dates and times, and the facilitator's desire to support the student with academic issues that may arise in class. The third letter is designed to notify parents of their child's involvement in the support groups.

CENTRAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

[REDACTED] AVENUE * [REDACTED] * [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] * [REDACTED] (FAX)

Kelly A. Rappa
Assistant Principal

To: All Faculty
 Fr: Kelly A. Rappa
 Re: 6th Grade Student Transition Group
 Date: October

The following students will be participating in the 6th Grade Student Transition Group. The students must have your permission to attend all in-school meetings. The students will bring you a pass to sign indicating that they are maintaining at least a C average and have your consent to miss class that day. They will be responsible for completing any work missed during our scheduled meeting times. A list of all in-school and after school meetings are listed below. I will be asking the students to bring bi-weekly performance reports to you for completion. If you have concerns, please see me.

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Joe Smith (6-1) | 7. Jennifer Hamm (6-7) |
| 2. Jane Doe (6-2) | 8. Mia Anderson (6-8) |
| 3. Mark Jones (6-3) | 9. Jeff Johnson (6-9) |
| 4. Sally Singer (6-4) | 10. Les Bass (6-10) |
| 5. Andre Timms (6-5) | 11. Valerie Small (6-11) |
| 6. Brian Ruer (6-6) | 12. John Ready (6-12) |

DATE	TIME	LOCATION
Wednesday, October 5	Period 1	Room 203
Wednesday, October 19	After School	Room 105
Wednesday, November 2	Period 2	Room 203
Wednesday, November 16	After School	Room 105
Wednesday, December 7	Period 3	Room 222
Wednesday, December 21	After School	Room 105
Wednesday, January 4	Period 4	Room 113
Wednesday, January 18	After School	Room 105
Wednesday, February 1	Period 5	Room 101
Wednesday, February 15	After school	Room 105
Wednesday, March 7	Period 6	Room 101
Wednesday, March 21	After School	Room 105
Wednesday, April 4	Period 7	Room 203
Wednesday, April 18	After School	Room 105
Wednesday, May 18	After School	Room 105

CENTRAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

[REDACTED] AVENUE * [REDACTED] * [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] * [REDACTED] (FAX)

Kelly A. Rappa
Assistant Principal

October ,

Dear Teacher,

_____ is invited to attend a 6th Grade Transition Group Meeting period 1 on Wednesday, October 5 in room 203.

All students who participate in leadership meetings are responsible for any work missed.

You must show this pass to your period 1 teacher before reporting to the meeting location. Your teacher may choose to keep you in class if you are missing assignments and have an average that is currently lower than a C.

Please have your teacher sign below indicating you have his/her consent to attend.

Thank you.

Kelly A. Rappa

Teacher's Signature: _____

CENTRAL MIDDLE SCHOOL



Kelly A. Rappa
Assistant Principal

Dear Parent of _____,

The transition to middle school comes at a very difficult stage in a child’s development. Often we find that our students need a little more TLC to successfully navigate the expectations of the middle school environment. I’d like to formally extend an invitation to your child to be a part of our 6th Grade Transition Support Group.

Our meeting dates, times and locations are listed below. Our in-school meetings will focus on academic skill building. After school meetings will focus on developing social skills. The lessons and activities that are conducted will be done in a fun, entertaining, and engaging manner. Many of the after school activities will also involve inspiring students to become active members within our school and local community. At our first meeting, the specifics will be discussed with the students.

As a member of the 6th Grade Transition Group, teachers will be asked to provide regular feedback on student performance in and outside the classroom. This will allow me to support your student as academic issues arise.

I am very excited to be working with your child this year. In order to participate in the group, I need you to sign the paper below and return it with your child to his/her homeroom teacher. If at any time you have questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone or e-mail (kelly.rappa@waldenu.edu).

Sincerely,

Kelly A. Rappa

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Wednesday, April 4	Period 7	Room 203
Wednesday, April 18	After School	Room 105
Wednesday, May 18	After School	Room 105

Student’s Name: _____ HR: _____

I am aware that my child will be participating in the 6th Grade Transition. I understand that he/she will miss one class period per month (as allowed by his/her classroom teacher). On days of after school meetings, students who ride busses are permitted to take the late bus home.

Parent’s Signature: _____

Lesson 1 (In-School)

JUGGLING IT ALL

“Juggling It All” adapted with permission from Incentive Publications: Thompson, R., & VanderJagt, D. (2002). *Fire up for learning: Active learning projects and activities to motivate and challenge students*. Nashville, TN: Incentive Publications, Inc. (p. 21).

Objectives: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Reflect on the expectations of middle school and the numerous new responsibilities
- Discuss strategies and techniques students need to apply in order to successfully balance all of their in-school and out-of-school obligations
- Establish a list of working agreements for the group
- Begin to form relationships with one another and with advisor
- Begin to establish a sense of belonging
- Practice the use of interpersonal communication skills

Materials: Multiple objects for easy throwing and catching. We have used rolled up socks, wiffle balls, koosh balls, and bean bags. The number of needed objects depends on the size of the group. For a group with 10 students, five items is a reasonable amount of objects...to make it more challenging, 10 items (one per student) makes the activity interesting, and funny.

For the processing component, poster paper and markers are needed. You can use a chalk board or white board; however, recording thoughts on the poster paper will allow it to be brought back out in future sessions. If the facilitator is tech savvy, responses can be recorded on to the computer and projected. Again, this will allow the facilitator to project the responses at a future session.

Procedures:



1. Because this is the first time the students are meeting as a group, it is important to begin to build an understanding of why they have been invited to participate in the group. Explain that to start the session the group will be doing an activity to get to know each other a little more.
2. Have the students arrange themselves into a circle. As the facilitator, take one of the balls. Show the group that they are soft and harmless. Explain that for the first time around, the person with the ball will state her name loud enough for the group to hear and make a statement about something that she likes (e.g: My name is Kelly and I am a Disney fanatic. My favorite Disney character is Mickey Mouse). That person will then throw the ball to another member of the circle, who will state her name. This will continue until all members have introduced themselves. It helps to have students put their hands behind their backs once they have received and tossed the ball. Repeat until the facilitator is comfortable knowing that all students have learned their group members' names.
3. Next, the facilitator will take the ball and call out the name of a group member and toss the ball to her. That member then calls out the name of another student and tosses the ball to her. The pattern that develops should be random. Ask students to remember who they tossed to and received from. The last person that receives the ball should toss it to the facilitator, who started the circle. Send the ball around in the same pattern again...the facilitator should step out of the circle, becoming more of an observer.
4. Give the starter the ball to start the activity again. Once the ball has been tossed to the third person, give the starter another ball to start. Quickly, there will be many balls in the air. Keep adding balls to the circle. Let the activity continue for about five minutes. When the facilitator is ready to end the activity, stand behind the starter and ask her to place the balls into a bag instead of sending them back into the circle. Have students sit while still in circle formation.
5. Processing & Discussion:
 - Pose the questions: With all of the balls juggling in the air, how many times was there an in-air collision? Despite the fact that there may be 10 balls in the air at the same time, the balls do not often collide. Have students discuss how this was possible...on the poster

paper, write the words “Teamwork,” “Communication,” “Attention,” and “Follow Through.” Have each student take a marker and record words, phrases, or examples of skills needed in the activity that pertain to these areas. Asking students, “What did you need from the members of the group in order to be successful?” may help generate additional items for the list. (Students may make comments such as: listening for my name, focus on the person before and after me, accurate throw.)

- Discuss what happened when students dropped balls. Did students help one another pick up the balls? Did individual students go chasing after the balls? Did the balls get kicked out of the circle and left behind? What happened when someone on your team dropped the ball? How did it impact the rest of the team and group as a whole? Is there something that other members of the team could do to support each other or an individual to keep all of the balls in the air? Once students offer insights for improving the group’s ability to succeed with the activity, allow them the opportunity to apply their suggestions by engaging in the juggling activity again.
- When complete, pose the question...what was different this time around? Do you think you were more focused? Were you more attentive to the people before or after you?
- Metaphor time. Ask students if they know what a metaphor is. Explain that a metaphor, in general terms, is something that is meant to represent something else. This activity can serve as a metaphor for several different things. Pose the question: How many of you find that you have to juggle many different things at one time? Use another piece of chart paper and allow students to record in-school obligations on one half and out-of-school obligations on the other half. Once the lists are created, have students step back and observe the list. What do we see? How well do we really juggle all of these things? What are the consequences when we drop one of these “balls”? What is something that would help juggle these things better? How can we pick up “balls” for one another? (Students may suggest the use of a homework calendar or planner book. They may suggest setting up a working lunch every other day to support one another...or meeting at the library after school.)



- Tell the students: Throughout the activity, to be successful, there were things you all said you needed from one another. As a group, there are things that we will need from one another and expectations we will have of one another in order for our group to be successful. This will lead to a discussion of the group's expectations for one another and working agreements. (Working agreements could include: Speak your peace...say what you have to say at the time or let it go. Vegas rule...what happens in group, stays in group. Pick up the balls...if you see a group member fumbling a ball, help them pick it up. On time, on task.) Record the working agreements on a separate chart paper. The group's working agreements should be visible at each session and reviewed at the start of all future sessions. After the meeting, the facilitator should type the list of agreements to be placed into the students' group notebook that will be distributed at the next session.
6. Wrap it up! (attachment) Every "wrap it up" is meant to provide the facilitator feedback to determine if lesson goals were achieved. The feedback is also intended to provide the facilitator with information about the group's and the individual student's needs. In the column with the smiley face, students should list positive elements of the activity...what they learned and/or what they liked. With the frowny face, students should list things that would have made the activity better. In the "Tell me about it" section, students can privately ask for help with something, provide individualized feedback, give information about a situation with which they need help, provide an idea for a future session...the possibilities are limitless.

Wrap it up!

Tell me about it! _____

Wrap it up!

Tell me about it! _____

Lesson 2 (After School)

MODEL STUDENT & LET'S GET ORGANIZED!

Derek Jeter photo taken at Yankee Stadium in 2008 by Kelly Rappa.

“Star Student” activity adapted with permission from Incentive Publications: Thompson, R. & VanderJagt, D. (2002). *Fire up for learning: Active learning projects and activities to motivate and challenge students*. Nashville, TN: Incentive Publications, Inc. p. 19.

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Reflect on qualities that would allow them to be better students
- Discuss strategies and techniques students need to apply in order to become the model student they describe
- Examine current methods of organization and improve structures to increase possibility of success
- Continue to build relationships with one another and with advisor
- Practice the use of interpersonal communication skills

Materials: Depending upon the permanent space available to display the final products, the type of paper used to create the “model student” may vary. If there is permanent space to display the figures, using cardboard cutouts will allow the figures to last on display longer. Bulletin board paper can also be used and rolled up at the end of the session. They can be brought out and hung up in future sessions as desired.

Markers, scissors, and tape are also needed. If the advisor wants students to get a little more creative (and silly) she can have images from the computer of faces, noses, ears, smiles, eyes, and other body parts. This will allow students who may not like to draw be successful with the task.

Find photos of people considered to be models in their respective careers (e.g.: players from local professional sports teams, historical figures). These can be shown to students as photos or via computer projection. One model figure to be explored (attached). Handouts of model student (attached).

Will also need the working agreements established at the first meeting and copies of them for student notebooks. Students should be told in advance to bring their notebooks and planners with them to this meeting.

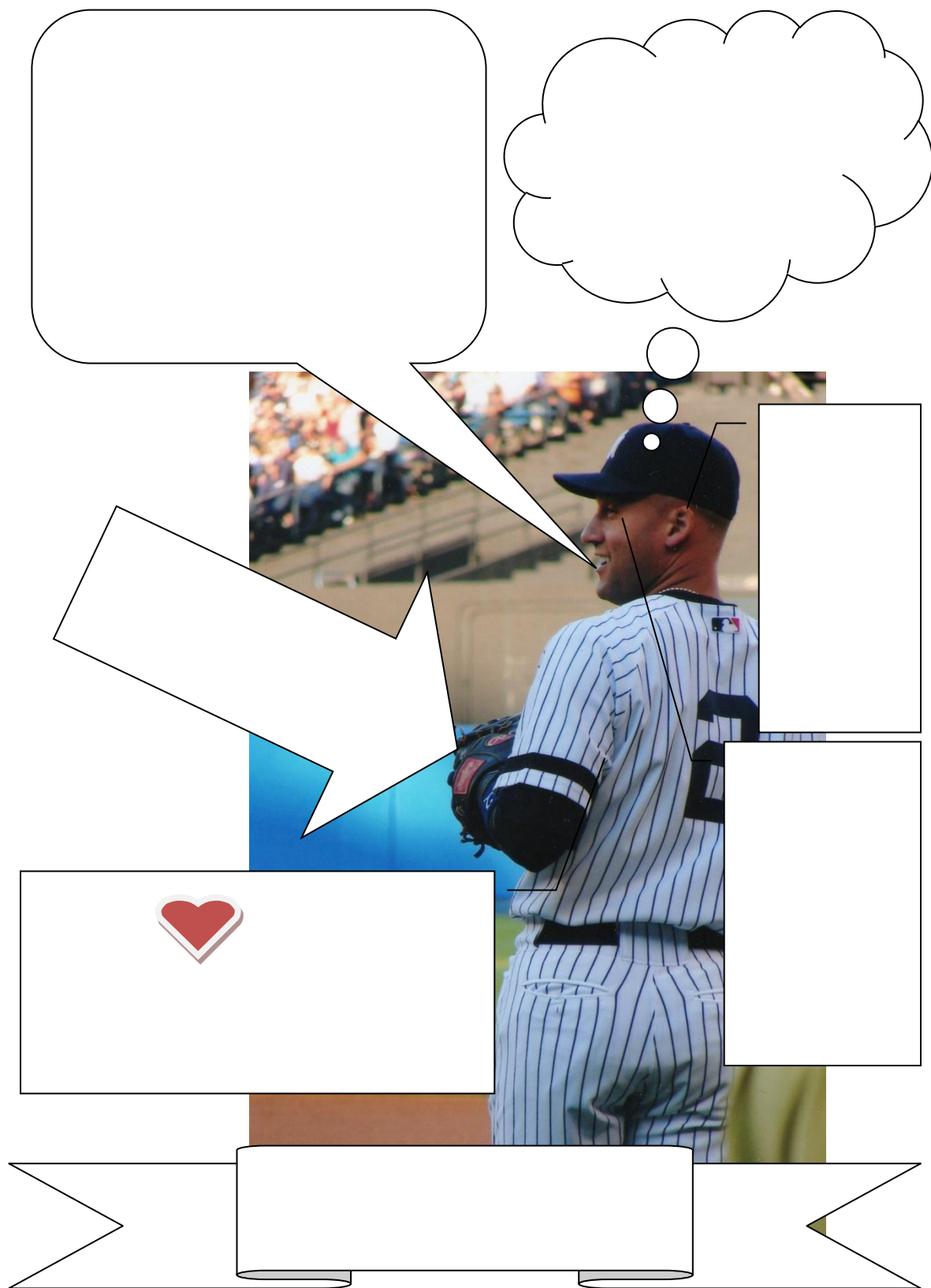
Black composition books, one for each student. Students will use these throughout the year to record information and insert handouts completed in group.

Procedures:

1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. Provide each student with a black composition book. This will be used throughout the year to record thoughts, goals, and notes from sessions. Have students attach copies of the working agreements into the front cover of the notebook.
2. Show the students the pictures of the “model” professionals gathered. Explain to students that these individuals are all considered “models” in their respective professions. Select one in advance to discuss in depth. It should be someone with whom the students are very familiar.
3. Display the model’s image on an overhead. Using the selected individual, collectively determine characteristics the individual displays that make him a “model” in his profession. For example, Derek Jeter is the model for our session.
 - What does Derek Jeter say that makes him a model? (characteristics get listed by the mouth) Students may list things like: knows when to speak and when to keep his mouth shut, he always has positive things to say about himself and his teammates, provides praise to teammates when they do well.
 - What does Derek Jeter think...what might go through his head? (characteristics get listed by his head) Students may list things like: be respectful of everyone, be responsible for self and teammates.
 - What does Derek Jeter hear? (characteristics get listed by the ears) Students may list things like: pays attention to directions from coaches, listens to feedback from teammates.

- What does Derek Jeter do...what actions make him a model player? (characteristics get listed by the hands) Students may list things like: practice, eat healthy foods, gets plenty of rest.
 - What things come from the heart...what does Derek Jeter feel? (characteristics get listed by the heart) Students may list things like: it is important to be involved in charitable and community service, care about your teammates.
 - What does Derek Jeter look like to others? (characteristics get listed by the eyes) Students may list things like: well put together, professional appearance on and off the field.
 - What do you think his motto is? (this sentence is for the banner on the paper) Students may say things like: If you dream it, believe it, and practice for it, you can do anything.
4. Divide the students into small groups. Ask one student to volunteer to lie on the paper while his teammates trace his outline. Explain to the group that they will be using the image they just created to identify the characteristics that make a model student a model student. Use the model student handout (attached) to ground the activity. (If students do not want to draw a life-size representation, the handout can be utilized in its place.) Have students use the different body parts, just as they did with the Derek Jeter example, to identify what qualities a model student possesses. (Throughout their discussions, students should identify qualities such as: be organized, responsibility, respect for classmates, good study habits, well organized notebooks, pay attention in class, follow teacher directives, get to bed early, practice skills learned in class, always try hard, know when and when not to speak in class, know when to ask for help, eat healthy foods, stay out of trouble, avoid drama....)
 5. When all groups have finished identifying the characteristics of a model student, hang the figures in front of the room. Ask each group to present their student to the group. As the group presents, the facilitator can either have students record in their notebooks the qualities of a model student...or create a handout of one model student that encompasses all of the students' thoughts. This can be attached to the students' notebooks at the next session.

6. Ask students to think back to the Juggling activity and reflect on how many things they have to Juggle in their lives. Pose the question...how can these qualities help them become better jugglers? What qualities do you think you need to focus on in order to become a model student? Record students' names and the quality/qualities they state, for reference at the next session.
7. Tell students, for the remainder of the time, they will focus on organization. Have students buddy up to help one another with organizing their notebooks.
8. Wrap it up! Use the “wrap it up” closure sheet included with the first lesson.





Lesson 3 (In-school)

GOAL SETTING & PROACTIVE vs. REACTIVE

Activity inspired by: Rottier, J & Libby, K. (2005). *Goal setting for success: Student Notebook*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Reflect on performance in class to date and develop an action plan for improvement
- Consider areas in relative to personal development and establish a plan of action for improvement
- Discuss strategies and techniques students need to apply in order to make improvements in desired areas
- Explain the difference between being proactive vs. reactive, and discuss the difference in their use in situations that pertain to school and home
- Continue to develop caring relationships with other students and staff

Materials: Students will need to bring their group notebook with them to the session if the facilitator allowed students to take them home after the last meeting.

Have copies of the “model student” compilation from the last session.

Obtain copies of student grades in progress for each of the students’ classes.

Copy the “goal setting” organizer (attached). These copies will be taped or stapled into the students’ notebooks.

Create “scenario” and “response” chart (attached). The scenarios should be based on situations the students encounter on a daily basis. The activity can also be completed on post-it paper and stuck to chart paper if the facilitator would like to refer to these again in a future session.

Procedures:

1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. The students entered the agreements into their notebooks during the previous session.

2. Provide each student a copy of the “model student” they created the last time. Explain to students that the notes on the student are a compilation of all of their comments on what makes a model student. Tape or staple the model student into their notebooks.
3. Explain to the students that the first part of the group will focus on discussing the difference between being PROACTIVE and REACTIVE. Post the definitions for the two words on board. Ask the students which definition goes with which word.
4. Using the scenario chart, ask students to consider the definitions of proactive and reactive. Tell them to think about each situation and record with a partner an example of a proactive way of addressing the situation and what a reactive response to the situation might be. When finished, have teams share their responses for discussion with the whole group.
5. Explain to the students that one way of proactively addressing situations is to think about what they want, set goals toward which to work, establish strategies or a plan that will allow them to achieve the goals, and then monitor their progress.
6. Provide each student a copy of his grades in progress. Ask students to look at the information and the model student information. Have students highlight or circle characteristics of the model student that they want/need to improve. These will serve as areas for their goal setting charts.
7. Show students the examples of personal and academic goals. Allow them the opportunity to add to the list.
8. Then, explain that it’s one thing to have a goal, but a goal without a plan is just a dream. To accomplish a goal, there needs to be a plan of action...strategies that demonstrate how the goal can be accomplished. Show students one of the goals with strategies. Have the students provide additional strategies for addressing other goals.
9. Ask students to look at the areas they circled, and create a goal statement on their goal sheet. Have students share the goal statements. Remind students that goals need to be things that are achievable and measureable...there should be some way of knowing whether or not the goal was achieved. Complete the goal setting sheet with assistance from facilitator. Including the column with “how will I know when it’s achieved?”

10. Once all students have their goal sheets completed, explain that having a support network is often the key to successfully accomplishing goals. We all have strengths...and one person's weaknesses are someone else's strengths. As a group, we all have areas where we excel. Have students share goals with the group and provide each other with "what or who are my supports?"
11. Tape or staple goal sheets into the notebook. They will serve as the focus of check-in meeting and monthly goal checks ups. In between group meetings, ask students to record thoughts about their goals and progress toward them in the "monitoring" section.
12. Wrap it up! Use the "wrap it up" closure sheet included with the first lesson.

Prepare for, intervene
in, or control an
expected or anticipated
situation; to act in
anticipation and
initiate change rather
than wait and respond
to an event.

Responding to a
situation with action
after an event has
taken place or already
occurred.

PROACTIVE:

REACTIVE:

PROACTIVE	SITUATION	REACTIVE
	There are so many things in and outside of school that you are responsible for, you are starting to lose track of what is going on when.	
	Your two best friends are arguing with one another and it is causing rumors and drama.	
	Your parents say you are spending too much time on the computer, playing Xbox and chatting on-line with your friends and not spending enough time with the family.	
	It's weird, you haven't been feeling like yourself lately...kind of sluggish, not energetic, super tired, and lacking focus.	
	Parent conferences are scheduled for a few weeks from now and you are a little concerned about what the teachers will tell your folks.	
	The marking period is about half over. Your grades in some classes are ok, but they could be better.	

NAME: _____

Start Date: _____ End Date: _____

GOAL: What do I want to accomplish?	PLAN OF ACTION: How will I accomplish the goal...what are my strategies?	SUPPORTS: What or who will support me and how?	ACHIEVED? How will I know when I've achieved my goal? What will it look like?
Academic:			
Personal:			

Monitoring: (Use this space to make notes about your goals in between group meetings.)

Lesson 4 (After School)

DREAM SCHOOL

“Dream Class” adapted with permission from Incentive Publications: Thompson, R. & VanderJagt, D. (2002). *Fire up for learning: Active learning projects and activities to motivate and challenge students*. Nashville, TN: Incentive Publications, Inc. p. 14.

National School Reform Faculty. (2002). *Future protocol (a.k.a. Back to the Future)*. http://www.nsrffharmony.org/protocol/a_z.html#F. Retrieved September 10, 2011.

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Identify characteristics of their ideal or dream school
- Examine what the current reality of their school is, in their minds
- Discuss strategies, techniques or activities that the students can engage in to create the school of their dreams, leading to positive social interactions with others in the school setting and a positive school climate
- Continue to build relationships with one another and with advisor
- Practice the use of interpersonal communication skills
- Develop a sense of belonging within their school community

Materials: Proud moments handout (attached). Three sections of bulletin board paper to hang on chalk board. All students will need markers: 1 blue, 1 green, 1 orange, and 1 red or pink. The facilitator will need markers also, purple or black. Chart paper will be needed to record the plan of action in working toward their dream school.

Procedures:

1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. The students entered the agreements into their notebooks during the initial session.
2. The opening of each meeting should also serve as an opportunity for a check-in on goals and to note any celebrations. Introduce the concept of the “proud

moments” handout. At every meeting, students will be asked to identify a “proud moment” that occurred (e.g.: improvements in class that led to increased grades, positive remarks from teachers or parents, handling a situation in a proactive manner, helping a classmate proactively resolve a conflict). When writing their proud moment, have students record their name on the back. Hang the week’s proud moments in a place that the students will see them. At the next meeting, return them and have students tape or staple them into their notebooks. These will serve as a powerful reflection tool throughout the year. They also help build self-esteem in students who are tough on themselves.

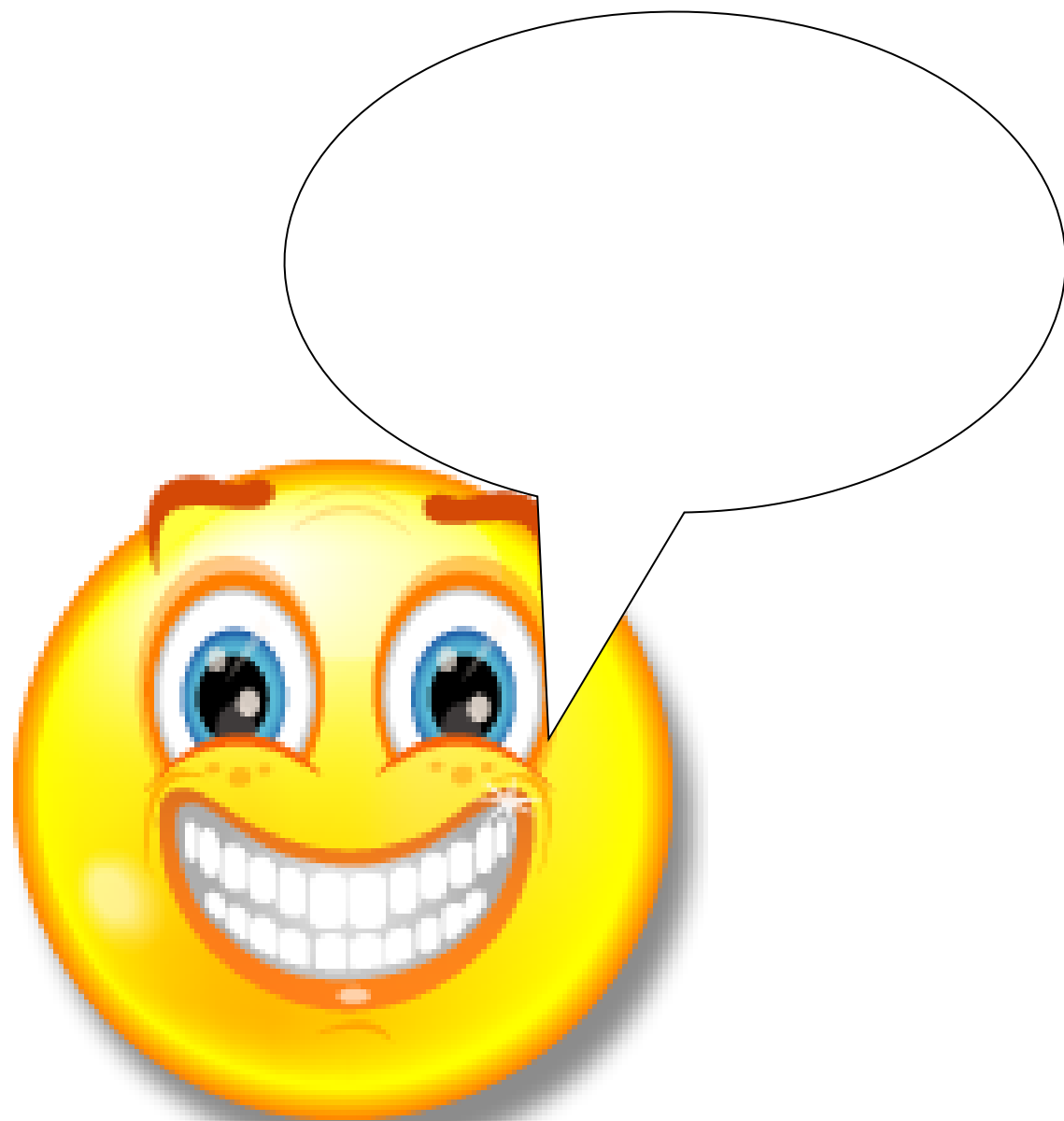
3. After school meetings are designed to involve more social elements of middle school. This meeting will lay the foundation for the after school meetings to follow. The ideas generated by the students will serve as the basis for activities and events the group will sponsor. Tell the students that they will be generating a description of their dream school, the perfect place to attend middle school.
4. On the bulletin board paper on the right, write the word “DREAM” in the middle. Tell the students they are to envision the characteristics of that special place. The first step will be to describe what the dream school looks like. Tell students to close their eyes and picture the school, the classrooms, the students interacting with one another, the teachers and students interacting, activities, hallways, busses, lunchroom.... Tell the students that they can only see what it looks like, they cannot hear anything. What do you see that makes this a special school? Have students take the blue marker and on the “DREAM” chart, record what they see when they envision this place. All comments should be made in present tense, as if the students currently see this happening. Throughout the process, tell students that they cannot speak with one another. They are to record their thoughts in silence. They can add to the thought of a classmate in writing, but no words should be exchanged.
5. The next step involves hearing sounds and conversations that would occur in their DREAM school. Have students close their eyes again to “hear” what their dream school sounds like in the classroom, the cafeteria, the bus, the gym, the halls.... What do you hear that makes this place special? Have students take the green marker and on the “DREAM” chart, record what they hear when they envision this place. Again, students are writing in silence.
6. The next step involves capturing feelings. Once again, have students close their eyes to visualize their DREAM school. Ask them to look around their

school to determine how it feels...What does it feel like to be in this special place? Have students use the orange markers to record feelings on the “DREAM” chart.

7. Ask the group to take a step back and look at the comments and characteristics they have listed. Discuss observations about the list. What do you see about our ideas of a dream school? What is important to us? What things describe student behaviors? What describe teacher behaviors? (Student descriptors may include: friendly students, welcoming environment, appropriate language, no name calling, respectful students, teachers praising students, students who are nice to each other, focus on learning, student work on display, clean building, safe halls, fun, collaborative environment, no disruptive students, field trips, engaging activities, people who care...)
8. As a group, take a look at the current REALITY of the school. In the center of the first chart, the facilitator should write the word “REALITY” in the center. (This activity will allow the facilitator the opportunity to see what the students’ perception of the school really is and give insight on what she can do to further assist the individuals in the group.) Following the same protocol as the DREAM chart, use the blue to record the REALITY of what the students see happening in their school, the green to record what they hear, and the orange to record what they feel. Again, conduct the activity in silence. When complete step back for observations.
9. The paper in the middle is meant to serve as a bridge...the facilitator can draw one or write BRIDGE on the top of the paper. Begin the conversation by telling students...the items listed on the DREAM paper are what we want in a school, and the REALITY often does not align with that dream. The BRIDGE is for us to examine...what can we do to make our reality into our dream? What do we need to do to cross the bridge to where we want to be? Using the pink (representing rose-colored glasses) record ideas that will bridge the gap or help the reality transform to the dream. Students may need prompting to generate ideas for changing their current situations (e.g.: compliment classmates, provide teachers recognition, plan social events, support community service activities, proactively respond to drama and gossip, bring bully prevention programs to the elementary schools, look for programs to bring to our school...). Ideas can again be formulated around the idea of what will it look like, sound like and/or feel like? (Facilitator Note: The next after school meeting focuses on rumors and may be a good place to start building

their dream school. Therefore, this step can be explored at the next session in greater detail.)

10. After the list is generated, have students discuss one that they want to work on changing. Remind them of their goal setting activity, where we only selected two elements to focus on. Focus on the selected item and follow the steps used previously in the goal setting activity. Record the goal and subsequent items on chart paper. Have students then brainstorm their plan of action: what strategies will we use to accomplish our goal? Consider supports; what or who will we need to provide support and how? Take this a step further...are there things that certain members of the group need to be responsible for to make it happen? What will it look like when we accomplish the goal?
11. At each after school meeting moving forward, the facilitator will draw on different aspects of the DREAM school, working with the students to develop activities and events that create the environment students envisioned using the same goal setting and monitoring process.
12. Wrap it up! Use the “wrap it up” closure sheet included with the first lesson.



NICE!!!!

Lesson 5 (In School)

GOAL CHECK-IN (Make it, Break it or Fix it) & STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Reflect on goals that they set for themselves
- Examine goals and determine the need to “make it, break it or fix it”
- Identify strategies and techniques applicable in the classroom to assist in achieving goals
- Promote a sense of self-awareness and responsibility
- Continue to build relationships with one another and with advisor
- Practice the use of interpersonal communication skills

Materials: Proud moments handout. Goal setting work sheets. Mini post-it notes, 2 different colors (or regular sized post-its cut down). Chart paper for front of room with the following words on it: “Totally,” “Mostly,” “Sort of,” “Not Really,” and “Let me rethink this.” Copies of Strategies to Achieve Your Goals handout (attached).

Procedures:

1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. The students entered the agreements into their notebooks during the initial session.
2. The opening of each meeting should also serve as an opportunity to note any celebrations (e.g.: improvements in class that led to increased grades, positive remarks from teachers or parents, handling a situation in a proactive manner, helping a classmate proactively resolve a conflict). Return previous session’s “proud moment” and have students complete a new one. As an in-school meeting, formal time will be spent reflecting on goals set and progress toward goals.
3. Ask students to turn to the goal setting handout in their notebooks. Using the mini post-it notes, have them place a post-it on each goal indicating whether

they think they “totally” achieved their goal, “mostly” achieved their goal, “sort of” achieved their goal, “not really” achieved their goal, or “need to rethink” their goal. Place the post-it directly on the goal.

4. Have students reflect on the strategy they planned to use to achieve the goal (sometimes the way we plan to achieve the goal is somewhat flawed, which impacts the ability to achieve what we want).
5. Provide students a copy of the Strategies to Achieve Your Goals handout. When copying the handout, leave the column on the right blank so that the group can generate a list of possible strategies that would work to achieve the goals set. Continue to build on the list based on the goals of the group. After the meeting, create a master copy of the list and provide it to students at the next meeting. Students should then tape it into their notebooks for future reference.
6. Tell the students that they are now faced with a decision...whether to make it, break it or fix it. Students need to determine if they need to establish new goals because they achieved the ones that were set (make it), are broken, didn't work, aren't able to be addressed realistically and need to be scrapped (break it), or if the goals and/or the strategies are ok but need modification or if the goal and/or the strategies were good but just not well executed (fix it). Have students label each with another color post-it note. It is helpful to post the definition of each on the board for students to visualize.
7. Provide each student with a new goal setting sheet for their notebooks. Facilitators should assist students in the development of new goals, strategies, supports, and outcomes. Tape or staple into the notebook.
8. Wrap it up! Use the “wrap it up” closure sheet included with the first lesson.

Strategies to Help You Achieve Your Goals

If Your Goal Is...	These Strategies May Help You Achieve Your Goal
To complete your homework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Write your homework in a calendar book, homework planner, special notebook <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Designate a time at home to be your “homework time” ~ Designate a specific place in your home to be your homework place ~ Do your homework in your notebook or keep a homework folder ~ Ask your teacher to verify you recorded the assignment correctly
To participate more; To focus better in class; To pay attention to what is going on in class; To avoid side conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Listen carefully when the teacher is talking and information in being presented ~ If something is said that you don’t understand, ask the teacher to repeat and show an example <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Raise your hand to contribute ~ Come to class prepared with your books, your notebooks, a pen/pencil <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Look at the person who is speaking ~ Take notes, especially when the teacher writes something down on the board ~ Carefully select your seat in the classroom...avoid sitting by friends, they may distract you...be sure you can see clearly ~ Put a post-it note on your desk, make a mark each time the teacher has to redirect your attention...shoot for a day with no marks ~ Repeat back what you heard the teacher say to ensure you understand everything ~ If you feel fidgety in class, cross your legs or bounce your foot...try keeping a stress ball in your pocket to squeeze and ground you
To study better or more often	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Use flash cards, especially for studying vocabulary words <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Write and rewrite the definitions of new vocabulary ~ Study your flash cards for 10-15 minutes EVERY day, focus extra time on those that you are unsure of ~ Practice extra math problems from the back of your textbook or from the book publisher’s website <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Use graph paper to organize math problems and eliminate confusion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Recopy your notes to improve recall ~ Read your notes out loud to yourself ~ Recite the things you want to remember out loud ~ Use highlighters to draw attention to the main ideas ~ Establish a study routine in an environment that works for you <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Use Books on Tape to support reading of novels ~ Make an audio-recording of your class notes or vocabulary words and listen to them repeatedly <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Walk or pace while you study ~ Create games to emphasize learning ~ Create mobiles, use play dough, or build structures to reinforce concepts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ At home, try studying while laying or sitting on the floor ~ Take frequent breaks to move around...but set a timer so your get back to what needs to be done quickly <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Close your eyes and try to visualize what you are studying...draw a picture in the air with your finger <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Work with a study buddy and quiz each other ~ Review information every day...start studying two or three days before a test...if you do a little each day, you will remember more

To ask for help; To get extra help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Be specific about your needs...avoid saying, "I don't get it." Narrow down what exactly is causing you difficulty ~ E-mail your teacher when you are having trouble at home ~ Ask specific questions ~ Come in for extra help or study groups ~ Ask if your teacher will allow you to work during lunch in her classroom
To read and/or follow directions better	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Highlight key words in written directions ~ Ask for clarification of words or phrases you do not understand ~ Restate the directions in your own words ~ Listen carefully to each step of the directions before you do anything ~ Repeat back instructions to verify you understand the request
To get to school and/or class on time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Set your alarm clock 15-30 minutes earlier than your need to ~ Set two alarm clocks, one that you have to get up to shut off ~ Pack your bag before you go to sleep at night and set the bag by the door ~ Leave yourself notes on the door with anything you MUST remember to bring with you that is not in your bag ~ Have a friend be your wake-up call buddy, set a time that he/she calls you ~ Go to bed earlier ~ Shut off the computer, phone and TV when sleeping...the extra noise or light in the room may cause you to sleep poorly

Other strategies that may help...

- ~ Use videos, internet sources, or films to help increase your understanding of information
- ~ Create a visual image and think in terms of pictures
- ~ Preview reading materials before you read...look at headings, subtitles, pictures for information about the text
- ~ Read the text under your breath
- ~ Act out the information to reinforce
- ~ Put lists to a rhythm or create a mnemonic to help remember
- ~ Use a reading guide to help focus on the words
- ~ If you work better alone, see if that is an option your teacher will entertain
- ~ When selecting a group or partner, avoid working with your friends
- ~ When selecting a method of presenting information, think about your talents and interests...select a style of presenting that you can get into
- ~ Shut off your computer and cell phone when you are studying...having texts and IM's interrupting you will decrease the effectiveness of your study session
- ~ Eat a good breakfast and healthy lunch to stimulate your brain

Lesson 6 (After School)

IMPACT OF RUMORS & DREAM SCHOOL

The Rumor Game adapted based on lesson plan: From The Shape of Change and The Shape of Change Stocks and Flows by Rob Quaden, Alan Ticotsky and Debra Lyneis, illustrated by Nathan Walker Prepared with the support of The Gordon Stanley Brown Fund, based on work supported by The Waters Foundation;
<http://www.clexchange.org/ftp/newsletter/CLEx18.1.pdf>

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Reflect on what rumors are, why they exist, and how they are spread
- Discuss how rumors can be disabled and when it is appropriate to report information to an adult to get assistance
- Discuss strategies, techniques or activities that the students can engage in to create the school of their dreams, leading to positive social interactions with others in the school setting and a positive school climate, specifically addressing the area of respecting others and disengaging rumors
- Continue to build relationships with one another and with advisor
- Practice the use of interpersonal communication skills
- Develop a sense of belonging within their school community

Materials: *Mr. Peabody's Apples* (2003) by Madonna. Proud moments handout. Posters created during DREAM SCHOOL activity, hang these in the front of the room. Rumor game recording sheets (attached). Chart for final compilation (attached).

Procedures:

1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. The students entered the agreements into their notebooks during the initial session.
2. The opening of each meeting should also serve as an opportunity for a check-in on goals and to note any celebrations (e.g.: improvements in class that led to increased grades, positive remarks from teachers or parents, handling a situation in a proactive manner, helping a classmate proactively resolve a conflict). Return previous session's "proud moment" and have students complete a new one.

3. Before delving into the project area the group selected to focus on at the last session, explain to the students that there is a topic you want to another activity that will allow them the opportunity to get to know each other better. Assign each student a number. One student in the group is assigned the number “0.” Do not point this out to the students. Provide each student a recording sheet (attached). Tell students that they are expected to visit a group member and tell them three things about themselves: their favorite cartoon character, their favorite ice cream flavor, and their favorite vacation spot. Explain that when they meet someone new, they will respond to questions and then exchange numbers (as if exchanging phone numbers). Tell them that after they exchange numbers, they are to multiply their number by their new friend’s number to obtain their new number. So, if my number is 2 and my new friend is 3, I’d multiply 2×3 to get 6. Six is now my new number. Record your new number and have your new friend sign your paper. Repeat until the facilitator says stop.
4. When time is called, most students, if not all, will have zero as their new number. Have the student who had the first zero stand up. Then have students stand that had zeroes after round 1, round 2...and so on. As students stand, record on the chart to show the exponential growth.
5. Metaphor time: So what does this mean? How can this relate to the spreading of rumors? If the zero was a rumor, or the person that started the rumor, how did it spread? What observations can you make about the process?
6. Pose the question: how many of you have heard a rumor this month? This week? Today? Within the past hour? How many of you have ever had a rumor started about you?
7. Ask students how rumors contribute to a disrespectful environment.
8. Pose the question: are there different kinds of rumors? (dangerous, hurtful, innocuous). (For additional emphasis, the group facilitator can use the following website to illustrate the difference between dangerous rumors, hurtful rumors and harmless rumors.
http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/games/rumorcontrol_flash.html Through a video game, students can select the appropriate response for handling each type of rumor: contacting an adult, throwing the response in the trash, or ignoring it as it rolls by.)

9. Ask the group to create a list with partners of why they think people start, tell or spread rumors. (Student responses could include: because they feel bad about themselves, to make someone else feel bad, to fit in, for attention, for power or control, revenge, to stir things up, out of boredom, misunderstanding.)
10. After the discussion, read the story *Mr. Peabody's Apples*, by Madonna, to the group. (A reading of the story can be found on You Tube at the link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9p4oM5lqq4>.) In the story, a boy observes his coach take an apple from an apple stand on his way home. The boy assumes the coach stole the apple, and spreads the rumor that he is a thief. The rumor spreads throughout the town. The story illustrates how far reaching rumors are and how impossible they are to clean up completely.
11. Based on the activities and the book, ask students to reflect on what they can do to limit the spread of rumors and how they should respond when they hear them. (It is important to review the idea that reporting dangerous rumors and hurtful rumors could help another person.)
12. If they haven't selected a DREAM SCHOOL area to focus on yet, this may be the catalyst...or it may cause the students to refocus the activity they want to do. Have students consider what they can do to support a caring environment for all students (e.g.: invite new students to sit with them at lunch, establish homework buddies, speak up or report disrespect in action, create "I'm not interested" buttons, bracelets or pencils to distribute with a message).
13. Wrap it up! Use the "wrap it up" closure sheet included with the first lesson.

Teacher Chart (for recording data after the Rumor Game)

Round	# of NEW zeros	TOTAL # of zeros
START		
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		

Student charts (to be used during Rumor Game)

Round	New Friend's Signature	Your Number
START		
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		

Lesson 7 (In School)

GOAL CHECK-IN (Make it, Break it or Fix it) & FOLLOWING DIRECTIONS

“Following Directions” adapted with permission from Incentive Publications:

Thompson, R. & VanderJagt, D. (2002). *Fire up for learning: Active learning projects and activities to motivate and challenge students*. Nashville, TN: Incentive Publications, Inc. p. 25.

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Reflect on goals that they set for themselves
- Examine goals and determine the need to “make it, break it or fix it”
- Understand and describe the importance of reading and following directions
- Promote a sense of self-awareness and responsibility
- Continue to build relationships with one another and with advisor
- Practice the use of interpersonal communication skills

Materials: Proud moments handout. Goal setting work sheets. Mini post-it notes, 2 different colors (or regular sized post-its cut down). Chart paper for front of room with the following words on it: “Totally,” “Mostly,” “Sort of,” “Not Really,” and “Let me rethink this.” Post-it notes for classroom activities analysis. Copies of Following Directions worksheet (attached).

Procedures:

1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. The students entered the agreements into their notebooks during the initial session.
2. The opening of each meeting should also serve as an opportunity to note any celebrations (e.g.: improvements in class that led to increased grades, positive remarks from teachers or parents, handling a situation in a proactive manner, helping a classmate proactively resolve a conflict). Return previous session’s “proud moment” and have students complete a new one. As an in-school meeting, formal time will be spent reflecting on goals set and progress toward goals.

3. Ask students to turn to the goal setting handout in their notebooks. Using the mini post-it notes, have them place a post-it on each goal indicating whether they think they “totally” achieved their goal, “mostly” achieved their goal, “sort of” achieved their goal, “not really” achieved their goal, or “need to rethink” their goal. Place the post-it directly on the goal.
4. Have students reflect on the strategy they planned to use to achieve the goal (sometimes the way we plan to achieve the goal is somewhat flawed, which impacts the ability to achieve what we want). Use the post-its to evaluate the strategy.
5. Tell the students that they are now faced with a decision...whether to make it, break it or fix it. Students need to determine if the goal and/or the strategies were good but just not well executed (make it), are broken and need to be scrapped (break it), or if the goals and/or the strategies are ok but need modification (fix it). Have students label each with another color post-it note. Use the handout with strategies if necessary.
6. Provide each student with a new goal setting sheet for their notebooks. Facilitators should assist students in the development of new goals, strategies, supports, and outcomes. Tape or staple into the notebook.
7. Once all students are finished with goals, the group will do an exercise on following directions. One of the areas students experience difficulty is with following teacher directions. Many students do not pay close attention and it interferes with their ability to be successful. Tell the students that they will be completing a survey so that the facilitator can get a better idea of what kinds of activities the group wants or needs to do as the year progresses.
8. Distribute the “surveys” without reading the directions to the group. Tell students to take as long as they need and to begin as soon as they receive the paper. Most of the students will jump into the task without reading the directions.
9. Once all students have caught on, conduct a debriefing. What was the point of this activity? What did you learn about the importance of following directions? Why is it necessary to read all information before you start a task? Have you ever missed a detail on a project sheet, quiz or test? How can you better attend to written directions? How can you better attend to verbal instructions? Share strategies to improve listening skills.
10. Wrap it up! Use the “wrap it up” closure sheet included with the first lesson.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Directions: This is a survey intended to give your advisor a better idea of what your interests are so she can better plan activities and events for you. Upcoming meetings will focus on a variety of topics, and your opinions about them are very important. Read every question completely before completing any item.

1. Do you think that the goal setting activities are helpful in keeping you focused on making improvements academically and personally? Describe how.

2. What element of the Dream School activity are you most looking forward to? Why?

3. Name 3 things in school that you still think you need support dealing with?

4. If we were able to get permission to take a field trip, where would you want to go and why?

5. What are other topic areas you would like us to discuss in group?

6. Your group leader wants to build a relationship with your family, which would you feel most comfortable doing: (a) inviting families in for breakfast, (b) having a dessert bar one night, or (c) after school coffee house.

7. What is your favorite subject? Why is it your favorite?

8. Describe your favorite teacher of all time. What was his/her classroom like?

9. Now that you have finished reading each item carefully, select any two items to complete. The turn your paper over and draw Mickey Mouse heads on the back. Do not give this away by talking or laughing...pretend you are really working.

Lesson 8 (After School)

RESPECT & DREAM SCHOOL

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Define RESPECT and DISRESPECT
- Provide examples of what they look like in action
- Develop a useable list of how to infuse a culture of caring and respect into their lives
- Discuss strategies, techniques or activities that the students can engage in to create the school of their dreams, leading to positive social interactions with others in the school setting and a positive school climate, specifically addressing the area of respecting others
- Continue to build relationships with one another and with advisor
- Practice the use of interpersonal communication skills
- Develop a sense of belonging within their school community

Materials: Posters created during DREAM SCHOOL activity, hang these in the front of the room. Proud moments handouts. Copy of Respect vs. Disrespect handout (attached). My heart handout (attached). Respect Yourself, Peers, and Adults Pledge handout (attached). A recording of Aretha Franklin's "Respect." There are many different videos on You Tube for the song "Don't Laugh at Me!" Several links are:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVjbo8dW9c8>,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HTNVXlirF4Y> ,

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKW_Bjb_VL0&feature=related,

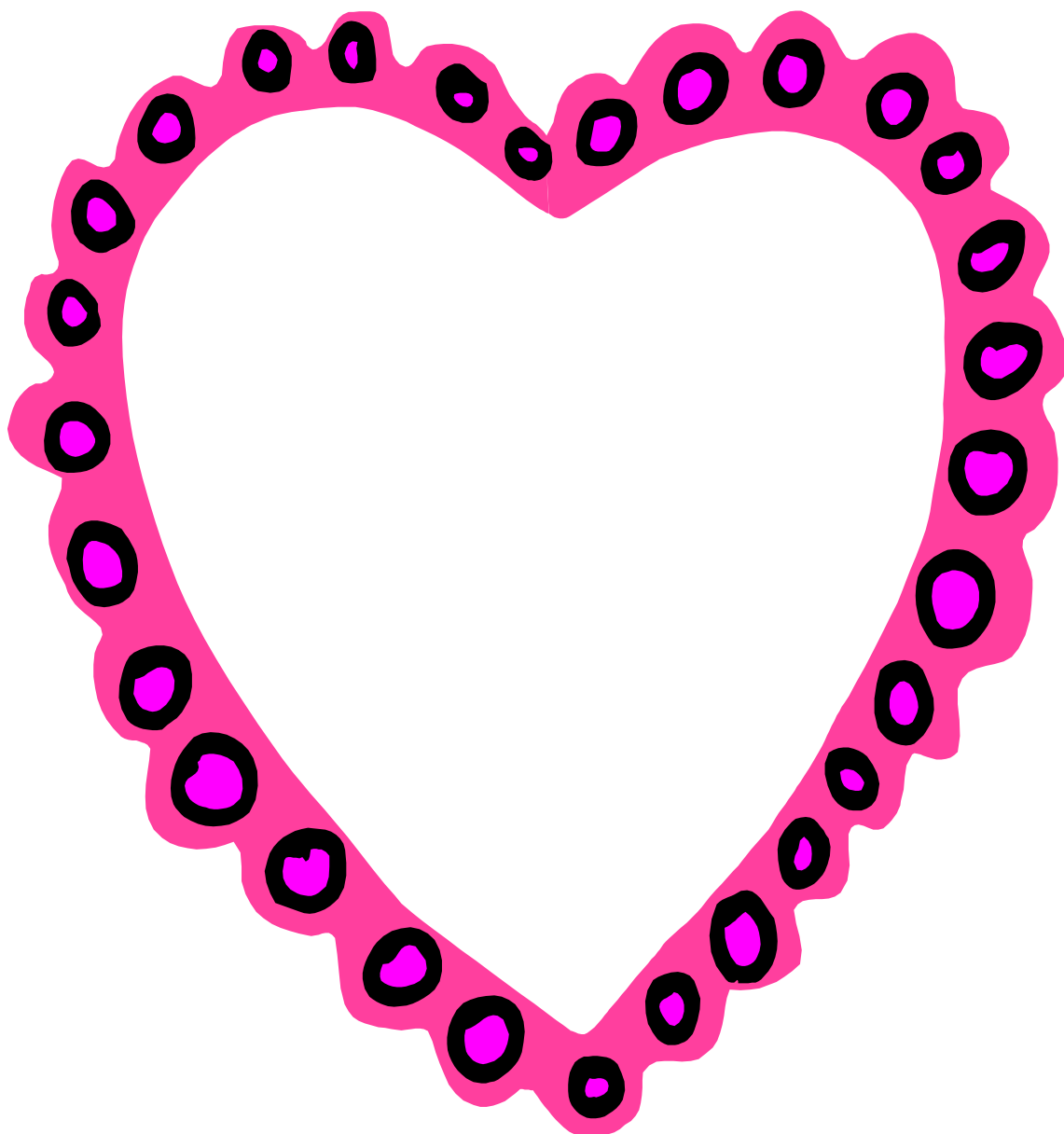
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aseUNZmIRho&feature=related>,

Procedures:

1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. The students entered the agreements into their notebooks during the initial session.

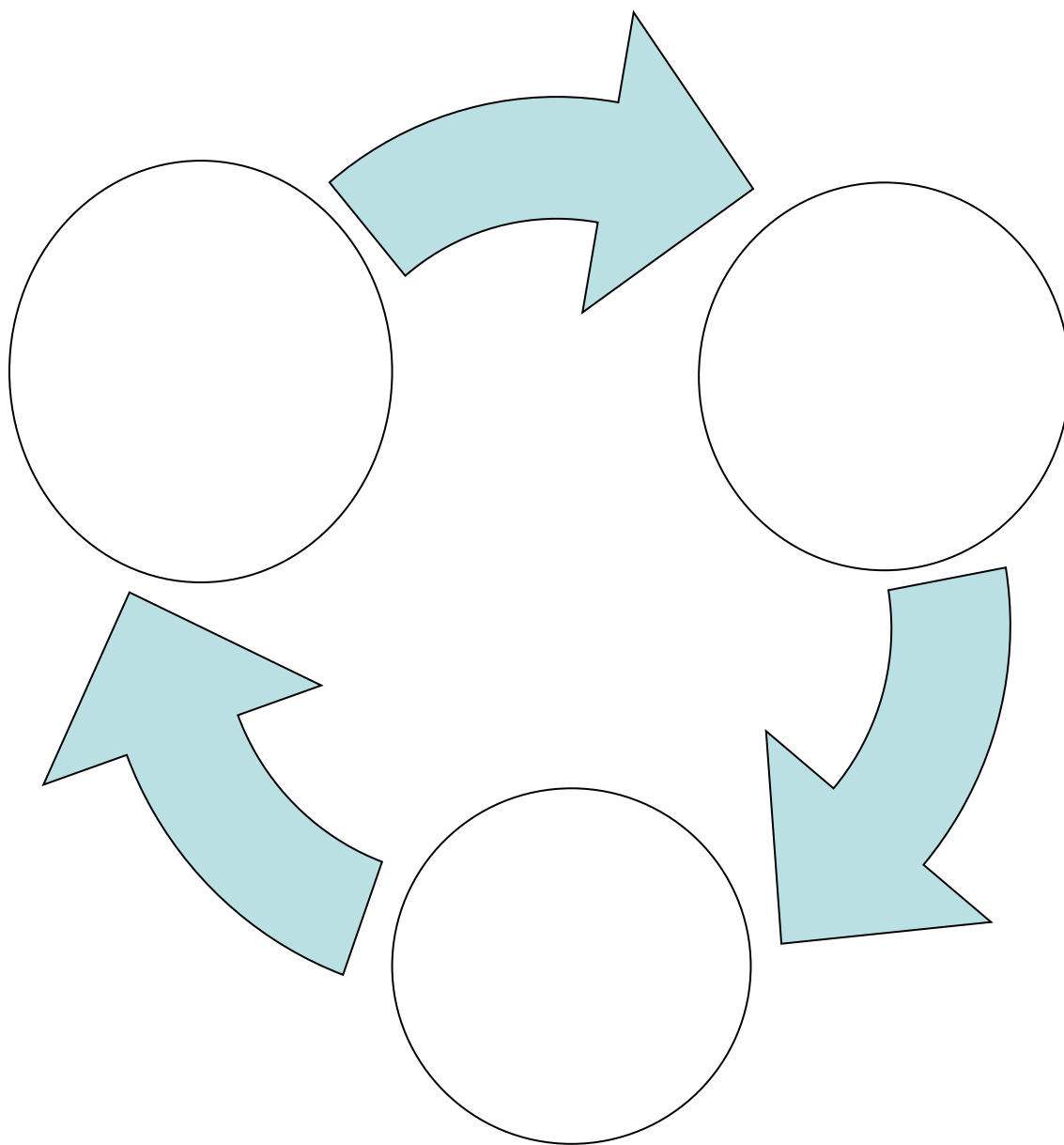
2. The opening of each meeting should also serve as an opportunity for a check-in on goals and to note any celebrations (e.g.: improvements in class that led to increased grades, positive remarks from teachers or parents, handling a situation in a proactive manner, helping a classmate proactively resolve a conflict). Return previous session's "proud moment" and have students complete a new one.
3. In the last after school meeting, the focus of the discussion was on rumors. The focus for this session will connect to that discussion, zeroing in on RESPECT for others. Play the beginning or Aretha Franklin's "Respect" as the topic is introduced.
4. Ask students to consider the following question: How do we hurt each other's feelings with our words and/or our actions? What things do we say and/or do that are hurtful to other people? Tell students to take a minute and on the "hearts" write down things people have said or done to them that have been hurtful. When finished, turn the heart over so all of the writing is facing down.
5. Ask if anyone knows the "sticks and stones" poem. (Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me.) Tell the students that you do not prescribe to that mode of thought, and believe the complete opposite and will demonstrate why.
6. Have a bucket filled with play sand. Within the sand, put pieces of stones, sticks, and rocks. Explain to the students to pretend that the bucket is full of things that people say to one another, the good and the bad. When filtered (using a sieve), the good things slide right through. Ask the students to examine what is left behind. Have them explain what these items represent (students should pick up on the connection between sticks and stones being hurtful words...as are the stones that people throw at you to insult). Have students discuss the items...how they feel (rough, potentially painful).
7. Play the "Don't Laugh at Me!" video for the students. When watching the video, ask students to listen closely to the lyrics and watch the images. At the end, use the following questions to open discussion: what was the song about? What images struck you? (In the Mark Wills video, the situations are "fixed" in the end. This is also a point of discussion.)
8. Ask students to think about the ideas they recorded on their hearts. If words never hurt, why do they last in your heart? As a symbolic gesture, tear up the heart and throw it away.

9. Use the Respect vs. Disrespect handout to define each. Then have students work in small groups to identify words and actions that illustrate Respect on the Respect flow chart handout. Each circle represents one of the following: respect for yourself, respect for peers, and respect for adults. Share ideas with the group.
10. Ask students to pledge to fight disrespect by doing the things they listed. Reflect on the DREAM SCHOOL, several elements likely pertain to this category. What might we do to promote Respect throughout our school? Have students sign the Respect pledge and hang where students can see. (In one school, a class created a video for the song “Don’t Laugh at Me!” to emphasize the point with its students. The teacher put the video on Teacher Tube at http://www.teachertube.com/viewVideo.php?video_id=260).
11. Wrap it up! Use the “wrap it up” closure sheet included with the first lesson.



DISRESPECT:

RESPECT:



Pledge Respect!

“Don’t laugh at me,
Don’t call me names,
Don’t get your pleasure from my
pain!”

I realize that my words and/or my
actions can hurt or help others.

Sticks, stones and rocks hurt...
and I refuse to throw them!

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Lesson 9 (In School)

GOAL CHECK-IN (Make it, Break it or Fix it), LOVE LISTS & PROPER PRIOR PLANNING

“Love Lists” adapted with permission from Incentive Publications: Thompson, R. & VanderJagt, D. (2002). *Fire up for learning: Active learning projects and activities to motivate and challenge students*. Nashville, TN: Incentive Publications, Inc. p.134.

Podcast found at: Tween Publishing’s The Middle School Student’s Guide to Ruling the World! (2011). <http://www.middleschoolguide.com/products/podcasts/>

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Reflect on goals that they set for themselves
- Examine goals and determine the need to “make it, break it or fix it”
- Identify techniques to effectively handle classroom responsibilities
- Identify strategies that will improve their ability to focus on classroom preparedness and note taking on classroom instructions
- Promote a sense of self-awareness and responsibility
- Continue to build relationships with one another and with advisor
- Practice the use of interpersonal communication skills

Materials: Proud moments handouts. Goal setting work sheets. Mini post-it notes, 2 different colors (or regular sized post-its cut down). Chart paper for front of room with the following words on it: “Totally,” “Mostly,” “Sort of,” “Not Really,” and “Let me rethink this.” Chart paper or large sheets of construction paper for lists. Copies of graphic organizers for effectively handling classroom responsibilities a.k.a. Proper Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance (attached). Computer for use with podcast: <http://www.middleschoolguide.com/products/podcasts/> Lesson number 6 on “to do” information.

Procedures:

1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. The students entered the agreements into their notebooks during the initial session.
2. The opening of each meeting should also serve as an opportunity to note any celebrations (e.g.: improvements in class that led to increased grades, positive remarks from teachers or parents, handling a situation in a proactive manner, helping a classmate proactively resolve a conflict). Return previous session's "proud moment" and have students complete a new one. As an in-school meeting, formal time will be spent reflecting on goals set and progress toward goals.
3. Ask students to turn to the goal setting handout in their notebooks. Using the mini post-it notes, have them place a post-it on each goal indicating whether they think they "totally" achieved their goal, "mostly" achieved their goal, "sort of" achieved their goal, "not really" achieved their goal, or "need to rethink" their goal. Place the post-it directly on the goal.
4. Have students reflect on the strategy they planned to use to achieve the goal (sometimes the way we plan to achieve the goal is somewhat flawed, which impacts the ability to achieve what we want). Use the post-its to evaluate the strategy.
5. Tell the students that they are now faced with a decision...whether to make it, break it or fix it. Students need to determine if the goal and/or the strategies were good but just not well executed (make it), are broken and need to be scrapped (break it), or if the goals and/or the strategies are ok but need modification (fix it). Have students label each with another color post-it note.
6. Provide each student with a new goal setting sheet for their notebooks. Facilitators should assist students in the development of new goals, strategies, supports, and outcomes. Tape or staple into the notebook.
7. The remainder of the lesson will focus on study habits and developing academic responsibility. To warm up, have students sit in small groups. Give each group a topic. The goal is to list as many ideas for the topic as possible. The first few rounds, the topics should be generic (e.g.: name things that are yellow, list cartoon characters from Disney movies, list things people eat for

breakfast). Then move to the focus of the lesson...list as many effective study habits and strategies as you can think of.

8. After the lists are created, have students share the information and create a page with tips for effectively handling classroom responsibilities for their notebooks a.k.a Proper Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance. (The facilitator can have the students record the information on to the graphic organizer or record all of the key points to give to students to insert into their notebooks at the next session. Responses should include things like: record as much information as available in planner, note special supplies needed for class, record what kind of test or quiz it will be to help in studying, use the rubric to guide work, know when, where and how things are to be turned in, note all instructions for projects, check off requirements as they are completed, write the deadline down and put reminders and checkpoints in leading up to the deadline).
9. Using the podcast found at Tween Publishing's The Middle School Student's Guide to Ruling the World! (2011). <http://www.middleschoolguide.com/products/podcasts/>, have students listen to Lesson number 6 "Due Dates, Deadlines & Directions: Polly Takes 'To Do' Notes." (The podcast is nearly 26 minutes long...forward it to the part where Polly describes wanting to succeed in her Social Studies class.) As students listen to the podcast, ask them to record where Polly went wrong and what strategies she should have used. Most students will be shocked that Polly's final average for the course was a C+ because many of her grades were A's and B's. Illustrate how the grades are calculated, which will reinforce the importance of recording all information to be properly prepared for class. Allow students to reflect on how not completing the assignment as instructed impacted Polly...and has ever impacted them.
10. Near the end of the podcast, there is an example for students to try. Polly's teacher is starting class with upcoming due dates and important information. This is typical of teachers in the middle school, so a relevant example. Tell students to listen to Mr. Dorigth as if he were their teacher. Their goal is to record all of the information that pertains to what, when and how they have to complete his upcoming assignments. After the recording, allow the students to exchange information. Look to see who heard what. Did anyone get it all? What strategies might be helpful to add to our list that would allow us to successfully get all of the information we need to complete tasks?
11. Wrap it up! Use the "wrap it up" closure sheet included with the first lesson.

**Proper
Prior
Planning
Prevents
Poor
Performance**

Lesson 10 (After School)

PERSONAL / PROFESSIONAL GOALS & SOCIAL NETWORKING & DREAM SCHOOL

Video resources available from: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. (2010). <http://www.netismartz.org/RealLifeStories/CantTakeItBack>

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Revisit discussion on rumors and status on rumor blocking
- Describe what they envision their lives to be in the future
- Think about how they want people to think of them 15 years after graduating from high school
- Consider where they are now and set goals that will help them achieve the life they desire
- Consider how things they put on the internet and social networks can impact their goals for the future
- Discuss strategies, techniques or activities that the students can engage in to create the school of their dreams, leading to positive social interactions with others in the school setting and a positive school climate
- Continue to build relationships with one another and with advisor
- Practice the use of interpersonal communication skills
- Develop a sense of belonging within their school community

Materials: Proud moments handout. Posters created during DREAM SCHOOL activity, hang these in the front of the room. “Look into my crystal ball” organizer (attached). Computer to show video “You can’t take it back,” found at <http://www.netismartz.org/RealLifeStories/CantTakeItBack>. Other free videos about the negative side of posting information on social networks available at: <http://www.netismartz.org/TeensTalkBack/OfflineConsequences> and <http://www.netismartz.org/NSTeens/ProfilePenalty>. A tube of toothpaste, a paper plate, and a plastic knife.

Procedures:

1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. The students entered the agreements into their notebooks during the initial session.
2. The opening of each meeting should also serve as an opportunity for a check-in on goals and to note any celebrations (e.g.: improvements in class that led to increased grades, positive remarks from teachers or parents, handling a situation in a proactive manner, helping a classmate proactively resolve a conflict). Return previous session's "proud moment" and have students complete a new one.
3. Provide students the attached handout where they will describe how they foresee their futures. Have students complete the first bubble responding to the following: What do I want to do/be (profession)? Bubble 2...describe what your life will be like...will you have a family? Where will you live? Bubble 3...as I am getting ready for my high school reunion, I can't help but wonder how others will remember me...this is what I want people to say about me when I see them.
4. Dreaming is one thing...ask students to think about what they need to do to achieve the future they envision. We have been doing a lot of goal setting and reflecting on short term goals, what are some things that they can start today that will help put them on track to achieving their "professional" and "personal" long-term goals. Students can do this for bubbles 1 & 3...number 3, emphasize that is this is how you want students to remember you, it starts with the behavior now. How can they interact with their classmates in order to assure their classmates will remember them in the way they hope? Ask if they have started acting differently with regard to rumors and spreading rumors as a result of the previous activities.
5. Ask students to respond to the following quotes: "Who needs television when there's so much drama on Facebook," "The only people with whom you should try to get even are those who will help you," and "Drama is made for movies, not reality." Do they agree? Disagree?
6. Throw out the question...how can something you put on a social networking site, the internet or in a text message effect your future goals? How might something come back to haunt you? Discuss the idea of "you can't take it

back,” colleges looking for information about you on Facebook and My Space, employers searching the social networks for information on potential employees. Use free videos from Net Smartz

<http://www.netsmartz.org/RealLifeStories/CantTakeItBack>,

<http://www.netsmartz.org/TeensTalkBack/OfflineConsequences>, and

<http://www.netsmartz.org/NSTeens/ProfilePenalty> to emphasize the point.

7. To emphasize the “you can’t take it back” point, bring a tube of toothpaste to the meeting. Squeeze the toothpaste on to a paper plate. Ask if anyone thinks they can get the entire tube of toothpaste back into the container. Have a volunteer take the plastic knife and attempt to get the toothpaste back into the tube. It is impossible. Ask the students to reflect on how it is like the information on the internet, pictures, rumors...remind them of the scene in Mr. Peabody’s Apples where the pillow was cut open and the feathers flew all over town. The information on the internet works the same way. Once it is out there, it is impossible to get it all back.
8. Have students consider what they have posted on their pages...or what their friends have posted about them on their pages. Are their images out there that you would not want hanging on your refrigerator door?
9. Shift the focus to DREAM SCHOOL. What can the group do to create the DREAM SCHOOL elements related to our own or others’ behavior on the internet (e.g.: educate others by creating handouts, show the videos to classes, host an after school town meeting on internet safety, bring in a guest speaker like Josh Gunderson to talk about Facebook). Develop a plan of action for the desired activity to be carried out over the next few weeks.
10. Wrap it up! Use the “wrap it up” closure sheet included with the first lesson.

What do I want to be or do? What will my profession be?

What will my family be like? Where will I live?



At my high school reunion, this is what people are going to say about me...

Lesson 11 (In School)

GOAL CHECK-IN (Make it, Break it or Fix it) & HAPPY B-DAY DR. SEUSS

“Happy B-Day Dr. Seuss” adapted with permission from Incentive Publications: Thompson, R. & VanderJagt, D. (2002). *Fire up for learning: Active learning projects and activities to motivate and challenge students*. Nashville, TN: Incentive Publications, Inc. p. 98 (Read Alouds).

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Reflect on goals that they set for themselves
- Examine goals and determine the need to “make it, break it or fix it”
- Reflect on positive aspects of their lives
- Begin to consider how they can positively impact the lives of other people in their community
- Promote a sense of self-awareness and responsibility
- Continue to build relationships with one another and with advisor
- Practice the use of interpersonal communication skills

Materials: Proud moments handout. Goal setting work sheets. Mini post-it notes, 2 different colors (or regular sized post-its cut down). Chart paper for front of room with the following words on it: “Totally,” “Mostly,” “Sort of,” “Not Really,” and “Let me rethink this.” Chart paper and markers.

Copy of the book *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?* by Dr. Seuss and/or computer to access video links of the story, found at:

http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xcuw5p_did-i-ever-tell-you-how-lucky-you-a_fun.

Copies of handout to accompany storybook (attached). Note: There is a reproducible handout with images from the book *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?* at the Seussville website:

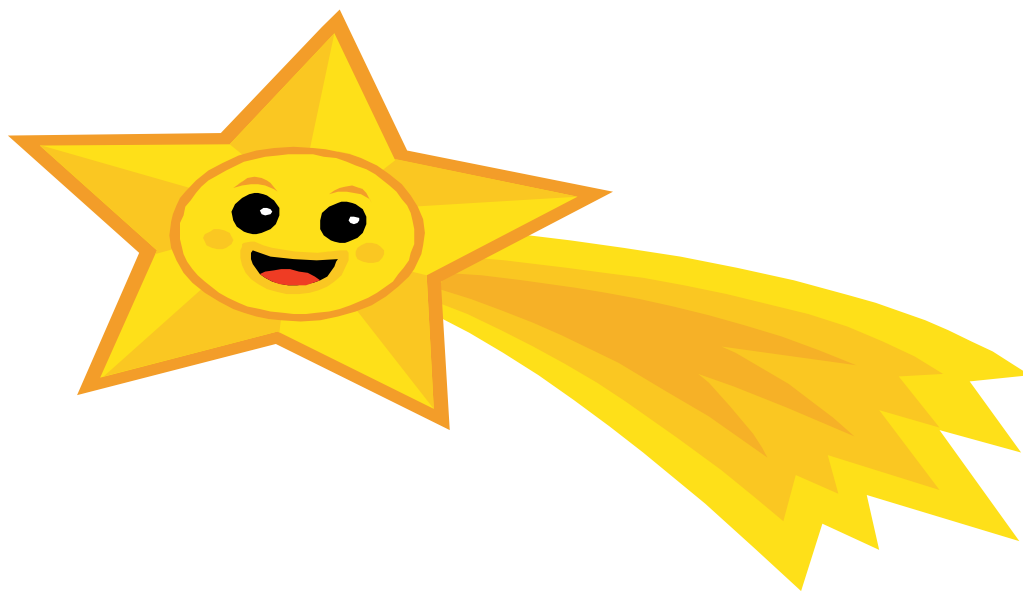
http://www.seussville.com/activities/DID_I_EVER_TELL_IAMLucky.pdf. Copies of Community Awareness handout (attached).

Procedures:

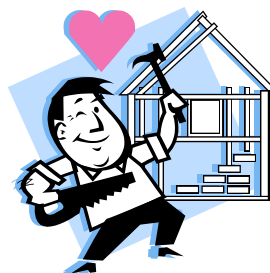
1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. The students entered the agreements into their notebooks during the initial session.
2. The opening of each meeting should also serve as an opportunity to note any celebrations (e.g.: improvements in class that led to increased grades, positive remarks from teachers or parents, handling a situation in a proactive manner, helping a classmate proactively resolve a conflict). Return previous session's "proud moment" and have students complete a new one. As an in-school meeting, formal time will be spent reflecting on goals set and progress toward goals.
3. Ask students to turn to the goal setting handout in their notebooks. Using the mini post-it notes, have them place a post-it on each goal indicating whether they think they "totally" achieved their goal, "mostly" achieved their goal, "sort of" achieved their goal, "not really" achieved their goal, or "need to rethink" their goal. Place the post-it directly on the goal.
4. Have students reflect on the strategy they planned to use to achieve the goal (sometimes the way we plan to achieve the goal is somewhat flawed, which impacts the ability to achieve what we want). Use the post-its to evaluate the strategy.
5. Tell the students that they are now faced with a decision...whether to make it, break it or fix it. Students need to determine if the goal and/or the strategies were good but just not well executed (make it), are broken and need to be scrapped (break it), or if the goals and/or the strategies are ok but need modification (fix it). Have students label each with another color post-it note.
6. Provide each student with a new goal setting sheet for their notebooks. Facilitators should assist students in the development of new goals, strategies, supports, and outcomes. Tape or staple into the notebook. Tell students that when reflecting on and developing new goals, they should also consider their long-term goals discussed during a previous session.
7. Start a conversation with the students by making the statement: many of us often feel that other people are luckier than we are. That they have things we wish we could have, whether material items, privileges, relationships...so on. How many of you have ever felt this way? Allow the students to describe

situations where they felt others were luckier than they are. Record experiences on chart paper.

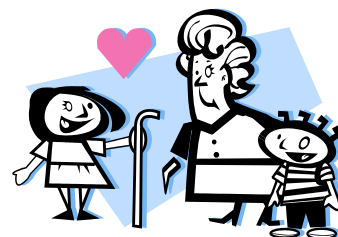
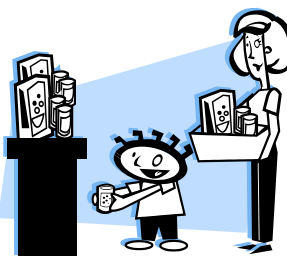
8. In honor of Dr. Seuss' Birthday and Read Across America Day, students will read and reflect on the Dr. Seuss book *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?* There are several videos on-line where students can watch the video version of the book if the facilitator prefers. (This site had the story with Dr. Seuss' animations: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xcuw5p_did-i-ever-tell-you-how-lucky-you-a_fun. An audio download was found at a very low price at http://www.seussville.com/books/book_detail.php?isbn=9780739339268).
9. After listening to the story and/or watching the video, have students look at the list they created earlier. Are these things really a big deal? Then flip it, posing the question: what do you have in your life that other people would consider you lucky for having? Record thoughts on the handout. Have students share their lists then staple into their notebooks as a reference for when times are difficult, and they need a reminder of what is positive in their world.
10. Tell students that people in our own community, in our own school, there are people whose situations are worse than your inability to go to the mall or to a party...worse than your parents not allowing you to get the newest Abercrombie shirt...they can't even afford to get new clothes at all...worse than the fact that you don't like the chicken dinner your parents made you...they have nothing in the cabinets to make for dinner, so they go hungry. Give them the community awareness handout. Staple it into their notebooks. Tell students their responsibility until the next meeting is to observe different aspects of their community. Look for ways that other people may not have it as good as they do. Listen for people talking about situations that are challenging. Read the local newspaper or township website to learn about areas in the community that need attention. Record these on the handout. Tell them to list as many things as they see, but to focus on finding at least one thing a day. This list will become the focus of the next meeting, so students should bring a completed list with them to the next session.
11. Wrap it up! Use the "wrap it up" closure sheet included with the first lesson.



“When you think things are bad,
when you feel sour and blue,
when you start to get mad...
you should do what I do...
Think of the things you are thankful for,
and share them below.
I am thankful for...
Just tell yourself, Duckie,
you’re really quite lucky!
Some people are much more...
oh, ever so much more...
oh, muchly much-much more
unlucky than you!”
—*Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?*
Dr. Seuss



Use the space below to record your observations about our community.
Look for ways that other people may not have it as good as we do.
Your goal is to create a list of 10-15 observations.



Lesson 12 (After School)

COMMUNITY AWARENESS & DREAM SCHOOL

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Recognize areas within their own community where people are in need of assistance
- Develop a plan of action to make a positive difference within a (or a few) selected areas
- Discuss strategies, techniques or activities that the students can engage in to create the school of their dreams, leading to positive social interactions with others in the school setting and a positive school climate
- Continue to build relationships with one another and with advisor
- Practice the use of interpersonal communication skills
- Develop a sense of belonging within their school community

Materials: Posters created during DREAM SCHOOL activity, hang these in the front of the room. Proud moments handouts. Hand out from previous session (community awareness). Chart paper and markers.

Procedures:

1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. The students entered the agreements into their notebooks during the initial session.
2. The opening of each meeting should also serve as an opportunity for a check-in on goals and to note any celebrations (e.g.: improvements in class that led to increased grades, positive remarks from teachers or parents, handling a situation in a proactive manner, helping a classmate proactively resolve a conflict). Return previous session's "proud moment" and have students complete a new one.

3. Ask students to flip to their community awareness handouts. These should be completed. (Facilitator's Note: At the individual check-ins in between meetings, it is a good idea to remind students about this activity. Some students may need additional assistance or lunch time help to get the list done.)
4. Have the students work in small groups and share their lists of observations. Ask them to look for commonalities...things that were/are surprising to them...the level of or amount of people that are impacted by a specific issue....things that stand out to them.
5. Instruct the students that they will be selecting issues from their group members' lists that they feel need to be addressed. Therefore, if there are 5 people in the group, there will be 5 ideas selected. The key here, though, is that the creator of the list does not select an item off of his own list, reinforcing the idea that it is not about them.
6. Have each group share the selected items to create one master list for the group. Ask the students to identify one or two areas from the list where they feel they want to make a positive impact.
7. Collectively develop a plan for how that will occur (e.g.: food drive, clothing drive, pet food/supply drive for the animal shelter, bake sale with profits going to a specific group, toy drive, book drive, visit local senior center, babysitting for parent nights at the school, thank you boxes for the fire fighters and police officers, make and sell friendship bracelets with profits going to a specific organization). There are many creative ways for students to simply make positive contributions to their local community. Within the conversation, students need to consider what permissions they will need, who will be responsible for what, how and when things will be completed, how and where their activities will be publicized. (Facilitator's note: some activities can become quite large and time consuming. The students will likely be very excited by the possibility of helping others and will dream big. It may become necessary to be the voice of reason without squashing their ideas. Downscaling, or at least starting out small, will lead to the increased likelihood of a successful outcome.)
8. Keep track of all of the big details on chart paper. Have students record their specific responsibilities and deadlines for completion in their notebooks and planners. Much of the planning and preparation will occur between group meetings. At individual check-in meetings, ask students to report out to ensure

the group stays on target to achieve its goal. Some projects can be on-going, but to make the impact desired and leave an impression on the students, focus on two meetings as the timeframe for development and execution (or one month).

9. Wrap it up! Use the “wrap it up” closure sheet included with the first lesson.

Lesson 13 (In School)

GOAL CHECK-IN (Make it, Break it or Fix it) & COMMUNITY AWARENESS PROJECT

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Reflect on goals that they set for themselves
- Examine goals and determine the need to “make it, break it or fix it”
- Continue to refine and execute their plan for positively impacting the lives of other people in their community
- Promote a sense of self-awareness and responsibility
- Continue to build relationships with one another and with advisor
- Practice the use of interpersonal communication skills

Materials: Proud moments handouts. Goal setting work sheets. Mini post-it notes, 2 different colors (or regular sized post-its cut down). Chart paper for front of room with the following words on it: “Totally,” “Mostly,” “Sort of,” “Not Really,” and “Let me rethink this.” Chart paper and markers. Chart from last meeting with project development and responsibilities.

Procedures:

1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. The students entered the agreements into their notebooks during the initial session.
2. The opening of each meeting should also serve as an opportunity to note any celebrations (e.g.: improvements in class that led to increased grades, positive remarks from teachers or parents, handling a situation in a proactive manner, helping a classmate proactively resolve a conflict). Return previous session’s “proud moment” and have students complete a new one. As an in-school meeting, formal time will be spent reflecting on goals set and progress toward goals.

3. Ask students to turn to the goal setting handout in their notebooks. Using the mini post-it notes, have them place a post-it on each goal indicating whether they think they “totally” achieved their goal, “mostly” achieved their goal, “sort of” achieved their goal, “not really” achieved their goal, or “need to rethink” their goal. Place the post-it directly on the goal.
4. Have students reflect on the strategy they planned to use to achieve the goal (sometimes the way we plan to achieve the goal is somewhat flawed, which impacts the ability to achieve what we want). Use the post-its to evaluate the strategy.
5. Tell the students that they are now faced with a decision...whether to make it, break it or fix it. Students need to determine if the goal and/or the strategies were good but just not well executed (make it), are broken and need to be scrapped (break it), or if the goals and/or the strategies are ok but need modification (fix it). Have students label each with another color post-it note.
6. Provide each student with a new goal setting sheet for their notebooks. Facilitators should assist students in the development of new goals, strategies, supports, and outcomes. Tape or staple into the notebook. Tell students that when reflecting on and developing new goals, they should also consider their long-term goals discussed during a previous session.
7. At the last session, the group decided on a project or two to make a positive impact on their local community. Use this session to examine the group’s goals and progress to date. By the next session, the project should be executed in full and the results should be visible.
8. Near the end of the meeting, have students recap responsibilities and tie up loose ends.
9. Wrap it up! Use the “wrap it up” closure sheet included with the first lesson.

Lesson 14 (After School)

COMMUNITY AWARENESS & DREAM SCHOOL

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Reflect on the community awareness project and its outcomes
- Discuss strategies, techniques or activities that the students can engage in to create the school of their dreams, leading to positive social interactions with others in the school setting and a positive school climate
- Continue to build relationships with one another and with advisor
- Practice the use of interpersonal communication skills
- Develop a sense of belonging within their school community

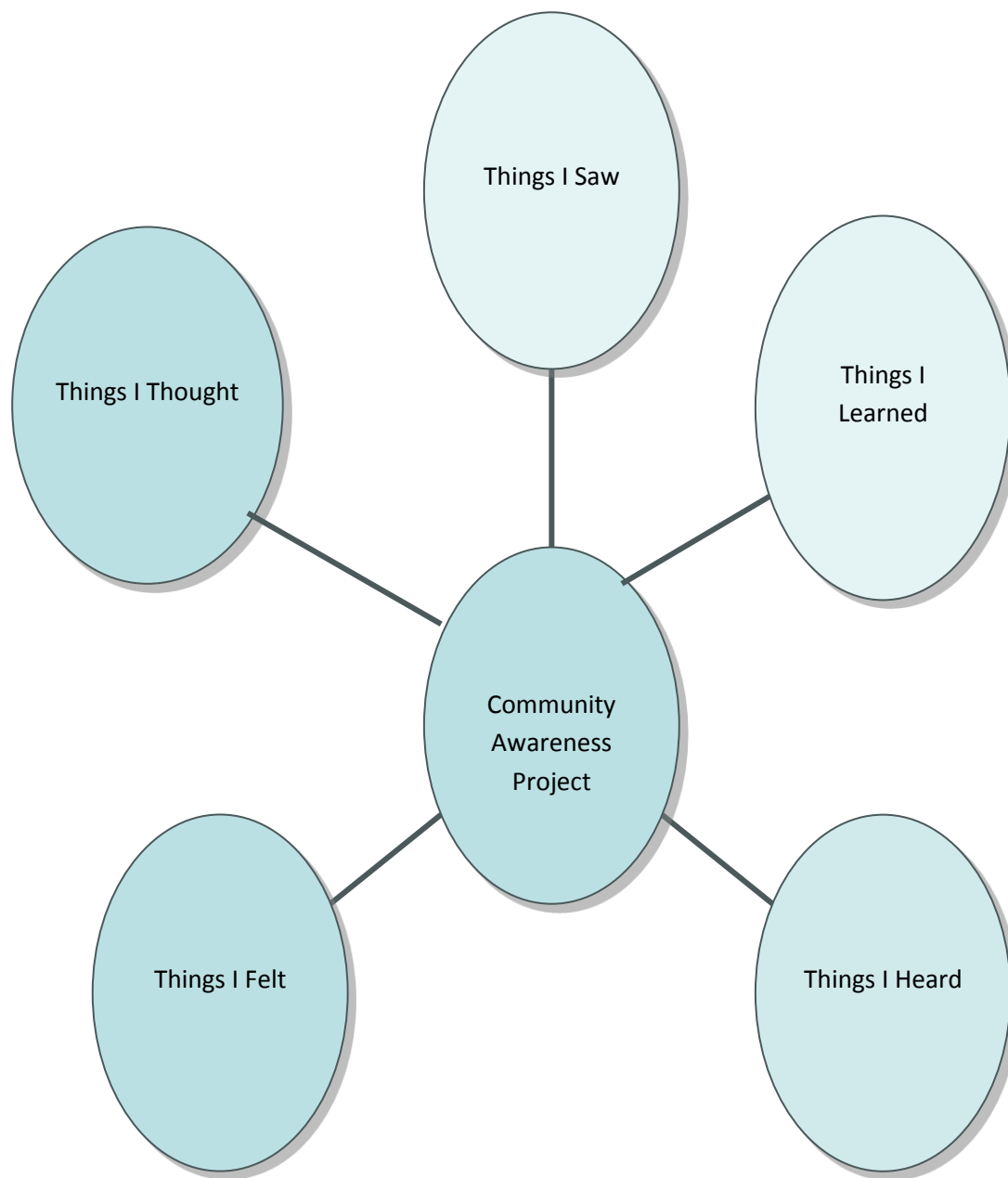
Materials: Posters created during DREAM SCHOOL activity, hang these in the front of the room. Proud moments handout (previous lesson). Charts from community awareness project development. Chart paper and markers. Community Awareness Project Reflections handout (attached). Copies of Planning Guide (attached).

Procedures:

1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. The students entered the agreements into their notebooks during the initial session.
2. The opening of each meeting should also serve as an opportunity for a check-in on goals and to note any celebrations (e.g.: improvements in class that led to increased grades, positive remarks from teachers or parents, handling a situation in a proactive manner, helping a classmate proactively resolve a conflict). Return previous session's "proud moment" and have students complete a new one.
3. Have students independently complete the Community Awareness Project Reflections handout. The reflections tap into the different senses...things the students felt, things that they heard as they worked, things that they saw, things that they thought about, and things that they learned. (Facilitator's

Note: This handout can also be used as the process unfolds to capture student thoughts as they are happening.) Facilitate a discussion based on student reflections.

4. Explain that every project has its positive features. In order to improve processes, it is also important to reflect on what would have made the project better. If we had the opportunity to do it all over again, what would we do differently?
5. Examine the DREAM SCHOOL list compiled at the beginning of the year. With only one session remaining, where do we stand? What can we do here to make small, but significant differences that will lead us to become the DREAM SCHOOL we envisioned months ago?
6. Draw from the list three or four areas within the school that they students may not have addressed to this point. Label the top of chart paper with the specific categories. Explain to the students that the group's next goal will be to address these areas with small teams...so each team will address different elements. Determine how many people will work on a team depending upon the overall size of the group (e.g.: if the total group has 15 students, then 3 groups of 5 is reasonable). Have the students report to the area they feel most passionate about (e.g.: staff recognition, positive school environment, faculty-student relations, school spirit, and community outreach). Explain that once the desired number of students is at a chart, the student must select a different area of focus.
7. The students will then replicate the process used over the past month to develop one (or a few) small act to positively impact this area. First, have students brainstorm on the chart what they can do to positively impact this area. Then, have students examine how and what it would look like when completed. Students will need to take into consideration what supports they will need (this element can draw in members from other groups, especially those who wanted to work in this area but weren't able to because of numbers). Finally, students should establish who will be responsible for what and by when. Have them use the Planning Guide to help organize their needs. Deadline for completion and report out will be the final meeting.
(Facilitator's Note: This activity will require additional check-ins with students before the final meeting. Some students may need additional time before school, after school, or at lunch to successfully complete their mini-projects.)
8. Wrap it up! Use the "wrap it up" closure sheet included with the first lesson.



Planning Guide

Group Members: _____

Focus Area: _____

Describe the Final Outcome or Product: _____

What needs to be done?	By whom?	By when?

What supports or permissions are needed? _____

Resources needed? _____

Check-in dates: 1. _____, 2. _____, 3. _____

Advisor Approval: _____

Lesson 15 (After School)

PAT ON THE BACK & CELEBRATIONS

“Pat on the Back” activity adapted from: Thompson, R. & VanderJagt, D. (2002). *Fire up for learning: Active learning projects and activities to motivate and challenge students*. Nashville, TN: Incentive Publications, Inc. p. 140.

Objective: Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Reflect on activities completed that contributed to the development of positive social interactions with others in the school setting and a positive school climate
- Celebrate the accomplishments of the group and recognize the positive qualities of group members

Materials: Posters created during DREAM SCHOOL activity, hang these in the front of the room. Planning Guides (from previous lesson). Copies of Community Awareness Reflections handout (from previous lesson). Three pieces of bulletin board paper and markers. Cut outs of hand prints (attached).

Procedures:

1. Opening: Every session should open with a quick review of the working agreements. Students should be given the opportunity to add or modify agreements as the group dynamics evolve. The students entered the agreements into their notebooks during the initial session.
2. Because this is the final group session, celebrations are the focus. So explain to the group that you will stray from normal protocol for this reason.
3. Have students work with their teammates for the DREAM SCHOOL project to complete the Project Reflections handout, adapted from the previous lesson. The reflections tap into the different senses...things the students felt, things that they heard as they worked, things that they saw, things that they thought about, and things that they learned. (Facilitator’s Note: This handout can also be used as the process unfolds to capture student thoughts are they are happening.) Facilitate a discussion based on student reflections. In order to improve processes, it is also important to reflect on what would have made the project better. If we had the opportunity to do it all over again, what would we do differently?

4. The goal now will be to reflect on the year as a whole, celebrating the accomplishments and learning of the group. Create three stations with bulletin board paper. On one write, “I am proud of....” On the second write, “I impressed myself or others by....” On the third write, “Through our group I learned that....” Give each student a marker. Divide the group equally into three...one group at each poster. Have the students record reflections on the poster paper without talking. Allow them 2-3 minutes at the station...then rotate to the next poster, until they have visited all three stations. They can write whatever they feel, but there is to be no discussion. They can add to the thoughts of their group mates or agree with a comment made. At the end of the rotations, have them step back and make observations about all three posters. Facilitate a discussion about the observations, pointing out areas worth celebrating.
5. As a final way of supporting one another and celebrating the relationships formed within the group, the last activity will involve giving each other a well-deserved “pat on the back.” Provide each student a hand print. Have students help one another tape them to each other’s backs. Have the students move around the room to write on the hand of every student in the group. Students are to write something positive about the person that is specific to that student. (Facilitator’s Note: It is a good idea to show the students an example of a completed hand so they can see what they are expected to do and the types of comments they should write.) Tell the students not to sign their names to their comment, leave it anonymous.
6. As students walk around the room, play music with a friendship theme (e.g.: “You’ve Got a Friend in Me” from Toy Story, “Lean on Me” by Bill Withers, “You’ve Got a Friend” by Carole King, “Friends in Low Places” by Garth Brooks).
7. Once everyone has signed all of the hands, have students return to their seats, remove their hands from their backs and read what others wrote about them.
8. Ask students to tape the hand into their notebooks. When they are feeling down, they can open their notebooks to get a “pat on the back” from their friends.
9. The facilitator can “wrap it up” with reflections on the year and recognitions for group members for positive accomplishments.



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Appendix B: Letter to Superintendent of Schools Requesting Consent to Conduct Research

Superintendent of Schools
Township Schools
312 Central Avenue

Dear Sir:

The purpose of this letter is to request your consent to conduct a case study that focuses on examining the transition from elementary to middle school through the eyes of the students experiencing the transition. This research is being conducted in partial fulfillment for an Ed. D. in Administrative Leadership through Walden University in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The goal of this action research project is to listen to and reflect upon the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of sixth graders in order to understand how they feel their developmental needs are or are not being supported as they transition into Central Middle School. I have selected this particular project because I am very interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the transition experience through our students' eyes. In an effort to continue to make improvements to the programs at Central Middle School, I elected to conduct a study that will not only fulfill my degree requirements, but will also better the experience for students transitioning to the middle school.

To gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of the transition into middle school, I will be gathering data through focus group interviews. Three groups, consisting of 6-9 students from each of the school's three interdisciplinary teams, will be randomly selected to participate in a 46-minute group interview. The three group interviews will be conducted during the students' elective or physical education period during the 2010-2011 school year. In order to randomly select students, I am requesting access to attendance lists (organized by students' current homeroom locations) for students that were present for the spring and summer orientation programs. Also, I am requesting access to a list of students in 6th grade who have had disciplinary infractions. For ethical reasons, these students will be precluded from the group interview process. It is expected that the group interviews will lead to valuable discussion and allow deeper understanding of the transition process.

I am also requesting access to the anonymous writing samples issued by the School Transition Team. The writing sample consists of several items that allow all 6th grade students the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings, and reflections about the transition into middle school. I believe these writing samples will be valuable in helping to create a more vivid description of how all students feel about the transition into CMS.

The data gathered will be analyzed and a detailed description will be generated that reveals how the students perceive their developmental needs are or are not being met as they transition into the middle school setting. This information will then be utilized to develop a product whose purpose will be to ease students' transition from elementary to Central Middle School.

I have included a copy of my doctoral proposal for your review. Within the proposal are copies of letters that, with your permission, will be provided to the principal of Central Middle School explaining the study, the letter that will be sent to the 6th grade parents requesting permission for students to participate in the focus group interviews, and an informational letter to 6th grade teachers explaining the study and how it involves their students. Also included is a copy of the guiding questions that will be used during the focus group interviews.

I look forward to conducting this action research project, not just to fulfill the requirements of my degree, but to continue to improve the educational environment for the students of our school system. If there are additional questions you have about my research, please feel free to contact me at any time. My doctoral study chairperson, Dr. Martha Moore, can also be contacted via e-mail at martha.moore@waldenu.edu to respond to questions you may have about my project study.

Thank you for your assistance and support.

Sincerely,
Kelly A. Rappa
Assistant Principal, Central Middle School
Doctoral Student, Walden University

Appendix C: Letter to Middle School Principal with Synopsis

Mr. F., Principal
Central Middle School
Central Avenue

Dear Mr. F,

The purpose of this letter is to request your consent to conduct a case study that focuses on examining the transition from elementary to middle school through the eyes of the students experiencing the transition. This research is being conducted in partial fulfillment for an Ed. D. in Administrative Leadership through Walden University in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The goal of this action research project is to listen to and reflect upon the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of sixth graders in order to understand how they feel their developmental needs are or are not being supported as they transition into Central Middle School. I have selected this particular project because I am very interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the transition experience through our students' eyes. In an effort to continue to make improvements to the programs at Central Middle School, I elected to conduct a study that will not only fulfill my degree requirements, but will also better the experience for students transitioning to the middle school.

To gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of the transition into middle school, I will be gathering data through focus group interviews. Three groups, consisting of 6-9 students from each of the school's three interdisciplinary teams, will be randomly selected to participate in a 46-minute group interview. The three group interviews will be conducted during the students' elective or physical education period during the 2010-2011 school year. In order to randomly select students, I am requesting access to attendance lists (organized by students' current homeroom locations) for students that were present for the spring and summer orientation programs. Also, I am requesting access to a list of students in 6th grade who have had disciplinary infractions. For ethical reasons, these students will be precluded from the group interview process. It is expected that the group interviews will lead to valuable discussion and allow deeper understanding of the transition process.

I am also requesting access to the anonymous writing sample issued by the School Transition Team. The writing sample consists of several open-ended response items that allowed all 6th grade students the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings, and reflections about the transition into middle school. I believe these writing samples will be valuable in helping to create a more vivid description of how all students feel about the transition into CMS.

The data gathered will be analyzed and a detailed description will be generated that reveals how the students perceive their developmental needs are or are not being met as they transition into the middle school setting. This information will then be utilized to develop a product whose purpose will be to ease students' transition from elementary to Central Middle School.

Attached you will find a synopsis of my project study. It includes information that is intended to provide you an overview on the purpose, goals, and procedures of the research study. It also addresses how student privacy will be maintained throughout the study. I have also included copies of letters that have been approved by the Superintendent. I have also included a copy of the guiding questions that will be used during the focus group interviews. If you would like a complete copy of my project study proposal, one will be provided to you.

I look forward to conducting this action research project, not just to fulfill the requirements of my degree, but to continue to improve the educational environment for the students of Central Middle School. If there are additional questions you have about my research, please feel free to contact me at any time. My doctoral study chairperson, Dr. Martha Moore, can also be contacted via e-mail at martha.moore@waldenu.edu to respond to questions you may have about my project study.

Thank you for your anticipated support.

Sincerely,
Kelly A. Rappa
Assistant Principal, Central Middle School
Doctoral Student, Walden University

Kelly A. Rappa
Project Study Overview

(A complete copy of the Doctoral Study Proposal will be provided upon request.)

Purpose of the Study: The goal of this project study is to listen to and reflect upon the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of the students experiencing the transition into middle school in order to gain a deeper understand of the students' perceptions of the transition into Central Middle School. By reflecting on students perceptions, it will become clear how students feel their developmental needs are or are not being supported throughout the transition into the middle school setting.

Focus Questions: How do students transitioning from their elementary schools into Central Middle School describe the support, or lack thereof, which they received throughout the transition?

1. How do students describe their feelings about the transition from elementary to Central Middle School?
2. How do students perceive their physical needs or concerns are or are not supported?
3. How do students perceive their social-emotional needs or concerns are or are not supported?
4. How do students perceive their intellectual-cognitive needs or concerns are or are not supported?
5. When evaluating the current transition programs in place at Central Middle School, what do students describe as strengths and/or areas for improvement?

Procedures & Privacy: During the 2010-2011 school year, 6th grade students will be randomly selected to participate in focus group interviews. Three groups (one from each 6th grade team) of between 6-9 students will be selected to participate in a group interview. Parents of selected students will be asked review an informed consent letter and complete a consent to participate form. The group interview will be conducted during the students' physical education or elective period. Each group interview will take one period, the equivalent of 46 minutes. It is anticipated that the group interviews will lead to valuable discussion about the transition process.

All interviews will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. Each student participant will be given a number and referred to in all documents only by their assigned number. I will be the only person with access to the names of the students as they correspond to each identification number.

To gain a complete picture of students' perception of the transition into middle school, I am also requesting the use of anonymous writing samples collected by the school transition team. These written responses offer all 6th grade students the opportunity to provide their perceptions on the transition into middle school. There will be no way for me to connect students with responses provided as they are instructed not to include their names, their friend's names, or names of family members in their writing sample. I

believe that the information included in the writing samples will be valuable to allowing me the ability to generate a vivid description of how all students feels about the transition into middle school.

The data gathered will be analyzed and a detailed description will be generated that reveals the students' perception of the transition process into Central Middle School, offering insight into how the students perceive their developmental needs are or are not being met as they transition into the middle school setting. This information will then be utilized to develop a product whose purpose will be to improve the transition process from elementary into Central Middle School, allowing students to feel their developmental needs are being supported throughout the transition. Participation by students in this study is strictly voluntary. Students, or their parents, have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

All of the gathered data will be used for this action research project. In the final doctoral study documents, the students will only be identified by their assigned number. The school district is being described as "a suburban school district in the Northeast region of the United States." A pseudonym, Central Middle School, is being used to refer to the name of the school. The interdisciplinary teams in the school are being referred to as the Wizards, Stars, and Magic. There is no compensation provided for any participant in the study. The final dissertation can be provided to you at your request.

Contacts & Questions: I am available to answer any and all questions you have about this project study. Feel free to contact me by phone [REDACTED] or by e-mail at kelly.rappa@waldenu.edu. You may also contact my Walden University Faculty Chairperson, Dr. Martha Moore, at any time via e-mail at martha.moore@waldenu.edu. Students or their parents may also contact a Research Participant Advocate at 800-925-3368, extension *1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 03-07-11-0057339 and it expires on February 1, 2012.

Appendix D: Parental Consent

Dear Parent of a 6th Central Middle School Student,

Your child is invited to take part in a research project that will allow him/her the chance to share his/her thoughts and feelings about the transition from elementary to middle school. This form is part of a process called “informed consent.” The purpose is to give you enough information about the study before deciding if you would like your child to be in it.

Who Am I? My name is Kelly A. Rappa. I am the Assistant Principal at Central Middle School. I am enrolled as a student at Walden University, seeking my Doctorate. This project is for my degree. I have selected this project because I am interested in understanding more about the move from elementary into middle school through students’ eyes.

Purpose of the Study: The goal of this project is to listen to and reflect upon the thoughts and feelings of 6th grade students in order to gain a better understanding of how students feel about the move to Central Middle School.

Procedures:

If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, he/she will:

- Take part in one 46-minute group interview, during an elective or PE period, with 6-9 other students that are on the same team as your child (the Wizards, Stars, or Magic).

Voluntary Nature of Study: You can choose whether or not your child is in this study. No one at Central Middle School will treat him/her differently if you decide not to allow your child to be in it. Students, or their parents, have the right to change their minds and withdraw from the study at any time. There is no payment provided for being in this study.

Privacy: Each student who participates in the group interview will be assigned a number. The interviews will be audio-recorded and later typed. Within the typed scripts, students will be identified only by their number. In the final report for this study, no information will be used that could identify your child.

The school district is being described as “a suburban school district in the Northeast region of the United States.” The school is being called, Central Middle School. The three 6th grade teams are being called the Wizards, Stars, and Magic.

Before the interview begins, students will be asked to sign a respect and privacy agreement. A copy is attached for your review.

Please note: Everything students share will be kept private. The only time I would have to tell someone what your child says is if he/she reveals something that could be harmful to him/herself or someone else.

Benefits & Disadvantages: Benefits to being in this project include giving individual students the chance to have their thoughts and feelings about the move to middle school heard in a semi-formal setting. It is important to note that the move to middle school is very hard for some students. Some students, including your child, may still be having difficulty. They may feel uncomfortable talking about specific topics, or may feel awkward sharing their feelings because

they don't want to appear uncool or have someone tease them. However, students' thoughts and feelings are important and need to be heard. Sharing them in this project may help future students coming from elementary school to CMS.

Contacts & Questions: I am available to answer any questions you have about this project now or at a later time. Feel free to contact me by phone at [REDACTED] or by e-mail at kelly.rappa@waldenu.edu.

You may also contact my Walden University Faculty Chairperson, Dr. Martha Moore, at any time by e-mail at martha.moore@waldenu.edu. You may also contact a Research Participant Advocate at 800-925-3368, extension *1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 03-07-11-0057339 and it expires on February 1, 2012.

If you are interested in allowing your child to take part in the study, please complete, and return one of the following consent forms to school with your child.

Please also review the student assent form with your child and have him/her sign it and return it to school with your signed consent form. Returned forms can be brought to the main office and placed in the box on the counter labeled "Mrs. Rappa."

Parental Consent to Participate:

I have read all of the information about the research project. I feel that I understand it well enough to make a decision about my child taking part in it. By signing below, I am indicating I understand and agree to the terms as outlined above.

Student's Name: _____ HR: _____

Parent/Guardian's Name: _____

Parent/Guardian's Signature: _____

Date: _____

(Completed forms should be return to school with your child. They should be returned to the main office and placed in the box on the counter labeled "Mrs. Rappa" on or before: _____)

Parental Consent to Participate:

I have read all of the information about the research project. I feel that I understand it well enough to make a decision about my child taking part in it. By signing below, I am indicating I understand and agree to the terms as outlined above.

Student's Name: _____ HR: _____

Parent/Guardian's Name: _____

Parent/Guardian's Signature: _____

Date: _____

(Completed forms should be return to school with your child. They should be returned to the main office and placed in the box on the counter labeled "Mrs. Rappa" on or before: _____)

Appendix E: Student Assent Forms

Dear Student,

My name is Kelly A. Rappa. I am your Assistant Principal at Central Middle School. I am also a student at Walden University. This is a research project for my degree. I have decided to do this project because I want to learn about students' feelings about coming to middle school.

Purpose of the Project: The goal of my project is to listen to the feelings of 6th graders at CMS. This will let me learn more about coming to middle school through students' eyes.

What Will I Do if I am in the Project?:

If you decide to be in the project:

- * You will be asked to take part in a group interview with 6-9 other members of your team (Wizards, Stars, or Magic).
- * I will be the interviewer.
- * The interview will be done during your PE or elective period.
- * It will take one class period.

It's Up to You!: Being in the study is your choice! You do not have to be a part of the project if you do not want to. If you decide now that you want to be in it and later change your mind, that's ok too.

Benefits & Disadvantages: Being in this project will give you the chance to share your thoughts about coming to CMS. The move to middle school is very hard for some students. Some students, including you, may still be having a hard time. You may feel strange talking about some topics. You, and/or the other students, may feel weird sharing thoughts because you don't want to look uncool or because you think someone may make fun of the comment. Your thoughts and feelings are important! Sharing them in this project can help future students that come to CMS.

There is no payment for anyone who takes part in the research.

Privacy: You will be given a number at the interview. Interviews will be audio-recorded and later typed. You will be identified only by your number in the typed script.

At the beginning of the interview, you will be asked to sign a respect and privacy agreement. **Please note:** The only reason I would have to tell someone about what you or someone else has said is if it is something harmful to you or someone else.

Contacts & Questions: If you have questions now or later call me at [REDACTED] or e-mail me at kelly.rappa@waldenu.edu. You may also contact my teacher at Walden University, Dr. Martha Moore. Her e-mail is martha.moore@waldenu.edu. You can also call a Research Participant Advocate at 800-925-3368, extension *1210.

If you are interested in being in this project, complete and return one form below. Keep one for yourself. NOTE: If you are interested in being in the study, your parents must also agree and complete the "parent consent form." Return it with yours to the box on the counter in the main office labeled "Mrs. Rappa."

Student Assent Form

I have read all of the information about the research project and feel that I understand it well enough to make a decision about being in it.

Student's Name: _____ HR: _____

Student's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Student Assent Form

I have read all of the information about the research project and feel that I understand it well enough to make a decision about being in it.

Student's Name: _____ HR: _____

Student's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F: Guiding Questions for Focus Group Interview

1. How long do you think it took you to get adjusted to middle school?
2. In front of you is a list of items generated by students transitioning into middle schools across the country. These are things students commonly identify as challenges, concerns, or things they have to adjust to. (Items are listed on the bottom of this page.)
 - You have 5 red stickers with your assigned number on them. Place the stickers next to items that you think students transitioning into middle school are often concerned about, find challenging or feel they are tough to adjust to. Feel free to add an item to the list.
 - Of the 5 stickers you placed, describe one of them in detail. (Please describe the element you selected. Explain why you think students typically experience difficulty with this element. How do you think schools typically address or respond to this concern? What else can middle schools do to address these areas of concern?)
 - You have 5 green stickers in front of you with your assigned number on them. Place these stickers next to items that you think students transitioning into middle school often find easy to deal with or adjust to. Feel free to add an item to the list.
 - Of the 5 stickers you place, pick one of them to describe in detail. (Please describe the element you selected. Explain what may make this easy to deal with. How do you think schools typically address or respond to this concern? What else can middle schools do to make this even easier to deal with?)
3. You all attended the different orientation programs we held. (These will be listed for students: guidance counselor and I visited the elementary school, they visited our 6th grade classes, team orientations were held in August.) Tell me something you found helpful to you.
4. What would have made the programs more helpful?
5. Think outside the box, what can the teachers or administrators at CMS add or change about the transition process to ease the transition into middle school?
6. Is there anything else you would like to say or other experiences you would like to describe that would help your school understand how to be more supportive of the students transitioning into CMS? If you choose to offer a personal story, I'd like you to refer to in general terms...as if it was not your own story. If you are telling a friend's story, please do not use names and, again, keep it as general as possible.

List items for question number 2.

- | | |
|--|---|
| * Kids trying to talk students into doing things they don't want | * Seeing a counselor to help with a concern |
| * Making new friends | * Getting used to having 7 different teachers |
| * Getting lost around the school | * The café...finding a seat, getting through the line |
| * Getting too much HW | * Being bothered by older kids |
| * Not seeing friends from elementary school | * Forgetting the locker combo or where the locker is |
| * Changing for PE | * Learning the new rules and procedures |
| * Dealing with rumors and gossip | * Kids teasing each other |
| * Leaving books, supplies or HW in locker | * Getting organized |
| * Teachers expecting too much from me | * Having more difficult work to do |
| * The bus | * Walking the halls |
| * Getting to class on time | * Learning to read the middle school schedule |

Appendix G: Anonymous Writing Sample Used by Transition Team

The 6th Grade Transition Team is trying to get a better understanding of your experiences during your transition from elementary into middle school. As we plan and prepare for the new 6th grade class, we need your help and feedback! Therefore, we are asking you to respond to several questions. For each open-ended response, use the space provided to write complete thoughts and clear details.

In order for your responses to remain anonymous, meaning no one will know who you are, please do not write your name anywhere on the paper. Also, do not refer to your friends or family members by using their real names.

Please complete and return to your homeroom teacher by : _____

Circle one: MALE FEMALE

Circle one: WIZARDS STARS MAGIC

1. Reflect on your experiences transitioning into middle school. Use the space below to describe to a 5th grader what to expect during their move from elementary to middle school.

- Describe 1 or 2 experiences (positive or negative) 5th graders should expect to face:

- Describe feelings or emotions (positive or negative) 5th graders may experience:

2. For many students, the transition to middle school presents some challenges because it is so different than elementary school.

- List up to 5 things that were a challenge or concern for you before you started school.

- Describe how, when, and by whom the challenges or concerns were worked out. If the concerns were not resolved, what would have helped you?

_How? _____

_When? _____

_By Whom? _____

_What else would have helped? _____

3. Central Middle School held several programs during your transition to middle school (your guidance counselor and your assistant principal visited your elementary school in May, you visited with CMS 6th graders, and your team held a summer orientation).

- List up to 5 things from any of these sessions that you think positively affected your transition into CMS.

- Describe changes that should be made to these programs or suggestions you have that would lead to improvements for future students?

4. In one sentence, summarize what every 5th grader should know about coming to middle school.

5. Use the space below to describe anything else you want to share about your transition from elementary school to CMS?

Appendix H: Informational Letter for 6th Grade Teachers

Dear Teacher,

Your 6th grade students are being invited to participate in an action research study that will allow them the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings, and opinions about the transition from elementary to middle school. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with important information that will enable you to understand the study and the role your students will play in it.

Who Am I? My name is Kelly A. Rappa. I am the Assistant Principal at Central Middle School. Additionally, I am enrolled as a student at Walden University, pursuing my Doctorate in Administrative Leadership. This action research project is being conducted in partial fulfillment for this degree. I have selected this particular project because I am very interested in understanding the transition from elementary into middle school through our students' eyes. In an effort to continue to make improvements to the programs at Central Middle School, I elected to conduct a study that will not only fulfill my degree requirements, but will also better the experience for students transitioning to the middle school.

Purpose of the Study: The goal of this project study is to listen to and reflect upon the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of the students experiencing the transition into middle school in order to gain a deeper understand of the students' perceptions of the transition into Central Middle School. By reflecting on students perceptions, it will become clear how students feel their developmental needs are or are not being supported throughout the transition into the middle school setting.

Procedures & Privacy: Students will be randomly selected to participate in focus group interviews. Three groups of 6-9 students, one group from each 6th grade team, will be selected to participate in focus group interviews.

The group interview will be conducted during the students' physical education or elective period during the 2010-2011 school year. The group interview will take one class period, or the equivalent of 46 minutes. It is anticipated that the group interviews will lead to valuable discussion and allow the students to elaborate on their perceptions of the transition into middle school. Each student who participates in the group interview will be assigned a number. The interviews will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. During transcription, students will be identified only by their assigned number. No one will have access to these numbers other than me.

The data gathered will be analyzed and a detailed description will be generated that reveals how the students perceive their developmental needs are or are not being met as they transition into the middle school setting. This information will then be utilized to develop a product whose purpose will be to make improvements to the transition process. All of the gathered data will be used for this action research project. In the final doctoral study documents, the students will only be identified by their assigned number. The school district is being described as "a suburban school district in the Northeast region of the United States." A pseudonym, Central Middle School, is used when referring to the school itself. The three interdisciplinary teams are being referred to as the Wizards, Stars, and Magic.

Voluntary Nature of Study: Participation by students in this study is strictly voluntary. Students, or their parents, have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. There is no compensation

provided for any participant in the study.

Risks & Benefits: Students participating in focus group interviews must also sign an agreement to maintain the confidentiality of others. Time will be spent at the beginning of each focus group session establishing working agreements, including respecting the thoughts and opinions of other participants, and reviewing the necessity of maintaining confidentiality following the focus group sessions.

Contacts & Questions: I am available to answer any and all questions you have about this project study. Feel free to contact me by phone at [REDACTED] or by e-mail at kelly.rappa@waldenu.edu. If you have questions once the study begins, do not hesitate to contact me. You may also contact my Walden University Faculty Chairperson, Dr. Martha Moore, at any time via e-mail at martha.moore@waldenu.edu. Walden University's approval number for this study is 03-07-11-0057339 and it expires on February 1, 2012.

Appendix I: Letter of Cooperation for Elective/PE Teachers

Date:

Dear Teacher,

I have obtained the principal's support to collect data for my research project entitled "Middle School Transition: A Case Study Exploring the Transition to Middle School through Students' Eyes." I am requesting your cooperation in the data collection process.

To collect data, I will be conducting three different group interviews with 6th grade students (6-9 students in each group interview). Selected students will be asked to participate in one 46-minute group interview that will take place during the student's physical education or elective period.

I propose to collect data during the week of _____. I will coordinate the exact date of each group interview with you as to minimize disruption to your instruction / assessment schedule.

In discussion with the building principal, he has indicated that students who participate be granted an excuse from class for the period. Students who participate will only miss one class period.

If you prefer to have the selected student excluded from the study, please let me know.

If you have questions about my study at any time, please feel free to contact me by phone at [REDACTED] or by e-mail at kelly.rappa@waldenu.edu.

I am requesting your signature to document that I have cleared this data collection with you.

Sincerely,

Kelly A. Rappa

Printed Name of Teacher: _____ Date: _____

Teacher's Signature : _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

Appendix J: Focus Group Invitation



Dear _____,
Homeroom: _____

You have been selected to participate in the team interviews about the transition from elementary to middle school!

Team interviews will be conducted on _____

At the end of period 5, I will meet you and the other students in the main lobby. We will then go to the Conference Room for the team interview.

The interview will take all of period 6. I will let your teacher know you will not be in class. When we meet, I will sign this pass so you can give it to your teacher for verification that you attended the team interview.

If you have any questions or concerns about the interview, please see me or send me an e-mail at: kelly.rappa@waldenu.edu.

Thank you in advance for your participation!

Mrs. Rappa

Appendix K: Student Agreement for Interviews

(* This document will be read aloud at the beginning of the focus group interviews.)

Please read along with me as I read this aloud to you. If you have questions or do not understand something, stop me so I may clarify things for you.

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of my research project. I appreciate your help. Being a part of this research project is your choice. If at any time you change your mind, just say so.

Before we begin, we need to review several very important items:

- Audio-taping and Privacy: This interview will be taped. The tape will be used later to create a script. You have been assigned a number. The number is on the card in front of you. When I type the script, you will be referred to only by this number. When you speak, I ask that you speak clearly. It is also important to speak one at a time. This shows respect to your classmates and it will let me hear all of the ideas more clearly when I type the script later. Also, because I want your identity to stay private, I ask that you not refer to yourself or anyone else by their real names...this includes friends, family members, or teachers.
- Respect for Others' Thoughts and Opinions: The goal of this research is to hear your thoughts and opinions. Everyone's opinions are important. During this interview, it is important that we all agree to listen and be respectful of all opinions. All of you will have an opportunity to share your feelings about a variety of things related to coming to middle school.
- Confidentiality: This means keeping what was said in this room private once we leave. What is said during this interview is between us and no one else. I do need you to understand that the only time I would have to tell someone what anyone in this room says is if it is something that could hurt you or someone else.

Do you have any questions about any of these items? Please print and sign below if you still want to be in the study and you agree to these three items.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

CURRICULUM VITAE

KELLY A. RAPPA

EXPERIENCE

February 2004 – present Central Middle School, *Assistant Principal*

- Conduct formal and informal observations of staff, offering constructive suggestions to improve instructional practices
- Devise the master teaching schedule and classroom assignments with consideration for the middle school model, developmental and academic needs of learners at varying grade levels, and the overall impact on the learning community
- Conduct analyses of state testing data to identify individual students in need of academic assistance and identify building-wide trends within cluster areas; disseminate data to staff
- Assist teachers and grade level teams in analyzing student data to inform instruction
- Assist staff to ensure alignment between Core Content Standards, school level plan, classroom focus plan and daily instruction to target areas in need of improvement in an effort to increase student achievement
- Collaborate with staff, supervisors and district level personnel to introduce and support the development and implementation of new programs (e.g.: Math Lab, Read 180, Balanced Literacy, Peacemakers, Professional Learning Communities)
- Assist building principal in conducting interviews and making recommendations for employment
- Perform daily supervision of building operations, student conduct and personnel; maintaining high standards for staff and students, and enforcing discipline in line with district and building policies
- Assist with the planning and execution of faculty, department and other building level meetings
- Coordinate and oversee implementation of character education initiatives and bully prevention programs, including Peacemakers, Ripple Effects, and video clips online
- Research and coordinate school wide assembly programs that support character education and building level initiatives (e.g.: Rachel's Challenge, George Street Players: In Real Life, Josh Gunderson: "Hooked on Facebook")
- Collaborate with teachers, guidance, CST members and parents to develop individualized student plans designed to increase student achievement and/or modify student behavior
- Establish regular communication with parents, arrange and attend parent meetings to promote student achievement
- Oversee and work with staff members on building level committees including Safety Committee, Food Service, 5th grade Transition Team and I&RS
- Serve as an instructional leader promoting professional development opportunities for staff members
- Coordinate and conduct spring and summer orientation programs for incoming 5th grade students and their parents
- Coordinate building use and testing sites for state testing; provide training for test proctors
- Support aspiring administrators to develop leadership skills and knowledge of various job responsibilities

1997-February 2004 Central High School,
English Teacher, South Campus Middle School
Student Council Advisor, Alternate Program Head Teacher

EDUCATION

Anticipate Completion 2012	Walden University
Ed. D. Administrator Leadership for Teaching and Learning	
A Case Study Exploring the Transition to Middle School From the Perspective of Students	
January 2003	Kean University
Master of Arts in Educational Administration and Supervision	
May 2000	The College of New Jersey
Master of Arts in Teaching Secondary English	
May 1996	Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
Bachelor of Arts, English and Journalism majors, Communication minor	

CERTIFICATION

State Certified Principal/Vice Principal

State Certified Supervisor

State Certified Teacher of English, grades 6-12

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT & AFFILIATIONS

Rutgers University – Graduate Course “Special Education Law”	Summer 2004
Marygrove College – Graduate Courses	Summer 2006
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Classroom Management to Promote Student Learning” ▪ “Succeeding with Difficult Students” ▪ “How to Get Parents on Your Side” 	
Attended Center for Effective School Practices	
Middle Level Leader Workshop sponsored by RU	Summer 2005
Middle Level Institute at Kean University	Summer 2009
Designing Creative Schedules Workshop	October 2005
Department of Education – I & RS Training	January & April 2006
National Middle School Association Convention in Nashville	November 2006
National Middle School Association Convention in Philadelphia	November 2005
State Middle School Association Convention	March 2009
Lucent CLC coaches training in Princeton	August 2006
Conducted In-service Workshop “Teaming in the Middle School”	September & November 2005
Served on a CAPA review team	January 2005
Member of National Association of Secondary School Principals	
Institutional Member of National Middle School Association	
Member of Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development	
Member of Principals and Supervisors Association	
Lifetime Affiliation – Alpha Chi Omega Sorority	

ACHIEVEMENTS & RECOGNITION

Empire Who’s Who of Women in Education 2005-2006, 2006-2007, 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010

Marquis Who’s Who of American Women 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010