2017

A Freshman Academy's Influence on Student Connectivity, Attendance, and Academic Achievement

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Walden University
2017

Abstract

A Freshman Academy's Influence on Student Connectivity, Attendance, and Academic

Achievement

by

Nancy O. LoPresti

MA, Montclair State University 2005

MAT, Marygrove College, 2002

BA, Kean University 1981

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

June 2017

Abstract

The transition from 8th to 9th grade, from middle school to high school, is considered one of the most challenging experiences in an adolescent's life. Ninth-grade transition programs, often referred to as freshman academies, have been developed and implemented over the last decade to address the needs of 9th grade students. The purpose of this study was to explore how the Freshman Academy may influence student connectivity, attendance, and academic achievement. Constructivist and human transition theory supports the premise that cognitive and social development markers are most prominent in the transition from 8th to 9th grade. Therefore, 9th grade transition programs that create a school environment that is nurturing and accommodating to needs of these adolescents may be influential in their academic experience. An evaluative study of an existing 4-year Freshman Academy in a rural New Jersey high school was conducted to provide formative data and evidence of the program's worth to stakeholders. Qualitative data was collected from program observations that included 22 teaching and professional staff, staff interviews, and a review of documented archival data and artifacts to evaluate the program's strengths and weaknesses, as well as its influence on student achievement. All data were color coded and analyzed through inductive content analysis and creative synthesis. Major and minor themes related to program influences emerged with regard to the Freshman Academy's impact on student connectivity to school, attendance and academic achievement. The study may also provide valuable information to assist in the creation of future 9th grade transition programs, which may enhance the freshman transition experience globally.

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Dedication

This project and capstone study is dedicated to my wonderful family, who supported me and provided me with the strength and perseverance needed to complete my doctoral research. To my husband, Dominick, who endured many hours of my research and writing, yet remained my biggest cheerleader. To Tara, Kevin, and Rory, who enthused me with their encouraging words, FaceTime chats, and endless inspiration. To DJ, who was always there for technical assistance and his calming reassurance that I would achieve my goal. To Lexi, who provided help in so many educational and professional ways, and Dan and Amari who reinforced my goal .

Also, I dedicate this to my father, Gene, who was so proud of my accomplishments in this doctoral study but who passed away before I finished. Thank you, Dad. I know you and Mom are watching and are proud.

Finally, I dedicate this to my close friends and extended work family, including the entire VTHS Freshman Academy team of professionals. Each one of you deeply inspired me personally and professionally. Without all your encouragement and assistance, this project would not have come to fruition

Acknowledgments

I would like to take this opportunity to formally acknowledge and thank the entire Walden University faculty and staff who have helped me along my path in completing this doctoral study and capstone project. A very special thank you goes to Dr. Shelly Arneson, who was not only my first chair, but also my inspiration to always keep moving forward, and who offered me words of wisdom and support when I needed it most. In addition, I wish to thank Dr. Tom Cavanagh for his honesty, guidance, and support, without which I could not have completed this project. I am forever indebted to both of you.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

Public high schools in the United States are experiencing increasing student absenteeism and failure of core curriculum subjects (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2007; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Rice, 2015). Although this phenomenon is being reported across all high school grades, the first year of high school can play a significant role a student's attendance at school and subsequent academic success through the 12th grade. Many contributing factors have been identified as components to a successful ninth-grade transition experience and, ultimately, progressive successes in each of the 3 following years of high school. Students' assimilation to a new environment and their social relationships, teacher relationships, school context, and curriculum are significant to students' connectivity to school (Langenkamp, 2010). Creating a positive connection to high school by focusing on these components and the school's ecological structure can enhance students' engagement in school, reduce vulnerability, and create a connectedness that can enrich the ninth-grade transition experience (Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009).

Chronic absenteeism creates gaps in learning and reduces connectivity to school, which adversely affects student achievement. Some of the external factors related to this trend include teenage pregnancy, students having to help with child care, marriage, an opportunity to earn money, and peer pressure (Princiotta & Reyna, 2009). However, internal factors including school climate and culture may also play a role in student

connectivity, attendance, and achievement. The transition to high school requires the adolescent to move from the known to the unknown and to accept more responsibility, greater rigor in their studies, and a new environment with a different teaching staff (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). These socioecological issues all play a role in high school transition and reduced connectivity to the new school culture, which may affect a student's attendance rate in the first year of high school. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) stated, "Statistics generated from freshmen year are concerning. Ninth graders have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, the majority of failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than any other grade" (p. 60). Four areas considered influential in student attendance and the potential to remain in school include the students' academic performance track, engagement, combined academic and engagement track, and past success with school transitions (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2010). Student engagement or connectivity to school, coupled with a continued desire to achieve academically, is an indicator of success in the freshmen and subsequent high school years. According to Nagaoka, Farrington, Ehrlich, and Heath (2015), students' academic performance and engagement are also tied to developmental competencies attained in the areas of self-regulation, knowledge and skills, mindsets, and values, which are a part of their background, culture, and community. The Freshman Academy is a transition program that addresses these factors, and those of a socioecological nature, by implementing strategies that are designed to meet the individual needs of ninth-grade students.

The freshmen transition experience and the effect of transition programs on student attendance and academic achievement became a focal point of a rural New Jersey School District in the 2012–2013 school year. Many states, including New Jersey, became aware of increasing absenteeism beginning in the freshmen year of high school, followed by an increase in failures in the core curriculum subjects. A freshmen transition program was discussed as a possible solution, and a panel of educational professionals was given the task of creating a pilot program based on research of other freshmen transition programs in the state. After visiting existing ninth-grade transition programs and researching components of successful models, the panel set out to create and develop a pilot freshmen transition program for the district. The original panel of school administrators was expanded to include other school stakeholders, including teaching staff, parents, and central office members. The newly formed group's mission was to create a Freshman Academy that represented the needs, culture, and climate of the school district, specifically targeting issues related to poor attendance and failing grades.

After spending a year researching existing freshmen programs, and reviewing the data related to poor student attendance and academic achievement, a proposal was put forth to incorporate a Freshman Academy in this rural New Jersey high school. A PowerPoint was created and presented to the board of education, and the program was well received. The district and the Freshman Academy Committee began the process of developing the program, recruiting staff and preparing for the first year of the academy's implementation.

Year 1 of this ninth-grade transition program was the school year 2013–14, Year 2 was the school year 2014–15, Year 3 was the school year 2015–16, and Year 4 was the school year 2016-17. As the academy entered its third year in 2015–2016, the original Freshman Academy Committee collected and documented data related to student attendance and pass/fail rates in core curriculum subjects (see Appendix F). An initial review of these data was promising, in that it showed decreased absenteeism and increased passing rates of core curriculum subjects for each year the academy was implemented. Archival data on student attendance and passing rates of core curriculum subjects continued to be collected by the board of education, as this was a focus for the program. It appeared that the Freshman Academy had made a positive impact on student attendance and passing rates, but without a program evaluation, the stakeholders did not know how or why these results had been realized. A program evaluation would provide the data needed to examine the factors that may facilitate or hinder continued improvement in these academy focus areas.

In determining how the Freshman Academy may have been influential in improving student attendance and academic achievement, a qualitative program evaluation was conducted and provided the means for this analysis. Multiple factors, including student connectivity to school, may play a role in the success of a Freshman Academy. Thus, additional qualitative data collected in this project study yielded insight to the program's areas of success and where improvement could be noted as well. This information addressed the gap in practice and lack of understanding about the

effectiveness of ninth-grade transition programs in influencing student connectivity, attendance, and academic achievement. Further, the study led to a program evaluation that provided information to the school district's stakeholders implementing the Freshman Academy regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the academy. The results of this study may also assist in the development of other ninth-grade transition programs throughout the state, country, and globally.

On behalf of the school district's board of education, the superintendent and assistant superintendent of schools supported this program evaluation in order to continue the formative process in the program's development (see Appendix B). I conducted the program evaluation as my project study and provided a program evaluation report to the board of education at its completion (see Appendix A).

Rationale

The purpose of this qualitative program evaluation was to gain an understanding of the Freshman Academy's effectiveness in improving student connectivity to school, thus improving attendance and academic success. In 2012, the leadership of a midsized public high school in northern New Jersey began collecting data on their recent ninth graders' attendance statistics and academic success. Academic success was qualified by how many students passed the core curriculum subjects versus how many failed those subjects, requiring credit retrieval in the sophomore and subsequent high school years. Of particular interest were the data collected on ninth-grade attendance and academic success and failure in core curriculum subjects prior to, and following, the

implementation of the Freshman Academy. An unacceptable percentage of ninth-grade students who attended the high school prior to the implementation of the academy were categorized as excessively absent, and many also failed the core curriculum subjects, requiring them to be on credit retrieval for the subsequent years of high school. Absenteeism and failures of core curriculum subjects were increasing in the freshmen class, and new strategies to address this problem was critical. A Freshman Academy model was supported and implemented to address this growing problem.

The stakeholders of this Freshman Academy were interested in understanding more about how the academy may have influenced student connectivity, thereby improving student attendance and increasing students' passing of core curriculum subjects in the first year of high school. They asked the superintendent and assistant superintendent of Schools to consider examining the program's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the program's impact on student attendance and academic achievement. As a result, I accepted the task of evaluating the program as a doctoral candidate and as an internal auditor with the superintendent's office providing their complete approval (see Appendix B). To accomplish this, I studied and investigated what factors are considered critical in creating and implementing a Freshman Academy that successfully addresses and improves ninth-grade students' connectivity to school, school attendance, and passing rates in core curriculum subjects.

A successful ninth-grade transition program provides a place where students experience a feeling of belonging, nurturing, and pride, which promotes the healthy

social interaction that may improve school attendance and the possibility for enhanced

academic achievement (Biag, 2014). Archival data related to Freshman Academy

students' attendance and academic achievement in core curriculum subjects were the

springboard for additional qualitative study. In further evaluating the program,

observational field notes from the program, as well as Freshman Academy staff

interviews, and a review of program artifacts provided insight into the impact of the

program and suggested improvements. Qualitative data like these provided a formative

evaluation regarding the program's continued development and progress. Further, the

resulting program evaluation report enlightened program stakeholders and facilitated the

development and implementation of other ninth-grade transition programs throughout the

state, country, and globally. A project study and program evaluation was believed to add

credibility to the Freshman Academy model for ninth-grade transition to high school and

for future program implementation.

Dillon (2008) stated, "Studies have shown that 9th grade is a pivotal point in a

student's academic career with data from the U.S. Department of Education revealing

that little more than 60% of freshmen from 1,700 schools nationwide make it to

graduation" (pp. 29–30). Many believe that high school reform begins with the

transformation of the ninth-grade experience because this sets the tone for the high school

years. The successful design should include the "structuring of small learning

communities" that are designed to provide "personalization to support the social and the

emotional needs of students during the transition from middle school to high school"

(Emmett & McGee, 2012, p. 75). Ninth grade and the high school years have evolved into a different social and academic setting over the last 2 decades. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the 21st-century Freshman Academy, or similar ninth-grade transition experience, through data collection, analysis, observation, and qualitative study and exploration. In the resulting program evaluation, I identified the factors that affected student connectivity and attendance, fostering student achievement in the ninth grade and throughout the high school year.

Definition of Terms

The following terms and phrases are defined and are used in the program evaluation.

Core curriculum subjects: The set of common courses required of all undergraduates and considered the necessary general education (Columbia University, 2013).

Credit retrieval: Borne out of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) movement, credit retrieval is the ability to gain lost educational credits through various other means, including online courses (McCabe & St. Andre, 2012).

Evaluability assessment: A process that explores the objectives, expectations, and measurable progress for review of the stakeholders. In evaluating programs, it is the initial step to provide timely and relevant findings for the decision makers of that program (Trevisan & Huang, 2003).

Freshman Academy: A freshmen transition program in a high school that provides new ninth-grade students additional resources and personalized support for overcoming well-known challenges (Cook, Fowler, & Harris, 2008).

Small learning communities: A structured, small group within a larger group meant to provide personalization, support, and emotional needs to students in transition (Emmett & McGee, 2012).

The house: An organizational arrangement of teams in a Freshman Academy that assigns mainstreamed student and teachers to a particular group, aka "the house" (PediaStaff, 2016).

Transition program: Educational platforms or programs that address students transitioning from school to school, providing a nurturing environment, social supports, teacher teaming, and collaboration for student success (Habeeb, 2013).

Significance of the Study

Research in the area of ninth-grade transition relates to at-risk students entering urban high schools and potential drop-out rates (Emmett & McGee, 2012; Johnson & Semmelroth, 2010). This program evaluation provided qualitative data on the freshmen experience through a different lens: the importance of building student relationships and connections with teachers and peers while creating appropriate ninth-grade benchmarks for ninth-grade student progressive development and academic success. According to Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2010), ninth-grade programs should focus on the establishment of caring relationships. Teacher–student relationships were "characterized by high levels of

trust, care and respect" and were "critical to the development of supportive relationships" necessary especially to ninth grade, transitioning students (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). In studies conducted in Norway, students' perceptions of teacher support declined in transition due to the departmentalization of subjects and an increased perception of depersonalization (Bru, Stornes, Munthe, & Thue, 2010). Students' relationships are a part of the transition experience from primary to secondary school, but most notably in high school (Curran-Neild, 2009; Dillon, 2008; Ellerbrock, 2012). Additionally, peer acceptance and students' ability to maintain these adolescent relations in the transitions, both in middle and high school, are components in the development of the Freshman Academy. Pretransition and posttransition experiences are significant in the adolescent's connectivity to school (Newman-Kingery, Erdley, & Marshall, 2011). Transition programs that nurture and facilitate these teacher and peer relationships may create greater school connectivity and, as a result, higher student attendance rates. Students who attend school have a greater passing rate in their core curriculum subjects; therefore, there is a direct connection between students' perceptions of support, student attendance, and academic achievement (Rice, 2015).

The gap in current research was studied by examining the metamorphosis of a present-day Freshman Academy in a rural high school over the period of 3½ years to gain perspective on what factors most enhanced connectivity to high school, thus improving student attendance, engagement, and achievement. In the resulting program evaluation, I addressed the basis for ninth-grade transition programs and how the Freshman Academy

affected academic and social change by improving student connectivity, attendance, and student achievement in a contemporary high school. Insights from the program evaluation and collected data on the impact of a Freshman Academy may serve to facilitate the development and improvement of freshmen transition programs across the nation and perhaps the globe. Transition programs like the one studied may produce connected and motivated high school students who exhibit improved attendance and a greater degree of academic achievement. The ultimate objective is to produce better-prepared students for college, community, and the workplace.

Research Questions

There are a number of factors that may play a role in a Freshman Academy being successful. For the purposes of this study, a program evaluation focusing on student connectivity, attendance, and academic achievement was conducted. These factors are critical to the program's success. In evaluating these components, consideration was given to teacher and student relationships; teacher and student interactions in and out of the classroom environment; and perceptions of teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators of the Freshman Academy. The main objectives of the academy are to enhance student connectivity during this transitional experience, thereby reducing student absenteeism and improving the passing rate of core curriculum subjects among freshmen students.

In the pilot years of this program, the students demonstrated improved attendance and passing of core curriculum subjects. As the program entered its 4th year in 2016–17,

the guiding questions for this program evaluation assisted in exploring the impact the Freshman Academy has had on student connectivity, attendance rates, and academic achievement. Also, the program evaluation assisted in the continued formative development of the program while providing other ninth-grade transition programs throughout the state and country with guidelines for their own ninth-grade transition program implementation. The overall research question for this study was the following:

How do the participants in this study describe or demonstrate the effectiveness of the Freshman Academy program?

Additionally, the qualitative subquestions for this research included the following:

1.   What are the perceptions of the teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors who participate in a freshmen transition program regarding student connectivity, attendance, and academic achievement?

2.   How do teachers and students participating in a Freshman Academy demonstrate program influence in the areas of student connectivity, attendance, and academic achievement?

These guiding questions were answered through the collection of qualitative data comprising of teacher, guidance counselor, and administrative interviews, program observations and field notes, and review of artifacts and archival data. Archival data included survey data, attendance rates, and ninth-grade students' pass/fail percentages in core curriculum subjects before and after the academy's implementation. Academy teachers and student interactions were observed, and field notes were analyzed for

emerging minor and major themes related to the research questions. Program artifacts were also reviewed to collect additional qualitative data related to the program's climate and culture and the impact made on student connectivity, attendance, and academic achievement. These data sources assisted in providing answers to the stated research questions in this project study.

<div align="center">**Review of the Literature**</div>

Conceptual Framework

Studies on the human transition experience are rooted in grounded theories of various theorists. Constructivists, including Vygotsky, Dewey, and Piaget, each addressed transition in human development, linking learning and behavior to a person's ability to link experience to organized knowledge (Gordon, 2009). Vygotsky introduced the zone of proximal development, which explored cognitive development as it relates to current ability and social interaction to fully evolve (Vygotsky, 1978). A Freshman Academy embraces this theory by providing a scaffolding of nurturing in these domains. Like Vygotsky, Dewey supported constructivism in theories on cognitive development. Dewey focused on change as a natural part of life's transitions and claimed that modern thinkers adapt using their current knowledge as well as their ability to accept natural influence. Similarly, in the developmental theory, Piaget (1952) also focused on assimilation and accommodation. In describing the stages of cognitive development, Piaget spoke of the final stage occurring somewhere after age 11 or 12 as the formal operational stage. In this stage, children assimilate by accepting new material and ideas

into their mind to begin changing the way they may perceive things. When these changes introduce new thoughts and practices, accommodation begins to occur. A ninth-grade transition program could facilitate the natural influences that support cognitive and social development in a positive manner (Piaget, 1952).

Contemporary behaviorists such as Deci and Ryan (2000) embraced self-determination, where humans have basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy and strive to be effective in their social and intellectual environments. In a different perspective, in the transition theory, Schlossberg (1981) indicated that humans adapt to transition based upon their perceptions of their control level and role change, the duration of the transition, concurrent stressors, and other personal and demographic contributors. Another theory that applies to the ninth-grade transition experience is the life course theory. In research on the transition to high school, Benner (2011) stated, "As with any developmental phenomena, numerous theoretical lenses can be applied to understanding the transition to high school, each with strengths and limitations" (p. 301). Studies on ninth-grade transition programs are supported by all four of these theoretical frameworks, as they are interwoven in research on human development, learning, and adaptability to new routines, expectations, and environments.

Review of the Broader Problem

Over the past 10 to 15 years, there has been a surge in the research on educational transition points, especially that of high school, which is considered perhaps the most important transition point of all in a student's educational trajectory (Abbott & Fisher,

2012; Benner, 2011; Curran-Neild, 2008; Hanewald, 2013). Attendance, connectivity, and student achievement are tied to student success in high school and in the trajectory to graduate. Many believe that ninth-grade attendance is the most critical grade of all in determining high school success. Rice (2016) stated, "In fact, a ninth-grader's school attendance is a better predictor of whether that student will drop out of high school than his/her eight-grade test scores" (p. 28).

Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2012) examined the critical components of a healthy and successful ninth-grade transition. Included are student–teacher relationships, peer relationships and social acceptance, interdisciplinary teaming, and increased individualized attention for incoming freshmen. These findings prompted additional research and the development of freshmen academies, which were created to meet the academic, developmental, social, and emotional needs of a ninth-grade adolescent entering a challenging time in their lives. The ecological dynamics and sustainable development of a ninth-grade transition program are critical to an adolescent's connectedness to school (Waters et al., 2009). A ninth-grade student's connection to school is influenced by his or her sense of belonging in how accepted and nurtured he or she feels and his or her connectedness to a new school, curriculum, responsibilities, and teachers (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2012; Habeeb, 2013; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). These factors influence a student's attendance and academic success.

The impact of student attendance on academic success. Grades and attendance are the primary factors in determining a student's subsequent success in high school. In

2007, more than half of the freshmen in public high schools failed a course, about 40% missed more than a month of school in absenteeism, and the average grade point average (GPA) was lower than a *C* (CCSR, 2007). The New Jersey Department of Education's (2015) report, sponsored by the Advocates for Children of New Jersey, indicated that "in the 2013–14 school year, a staggering 125,000 students in kindergarten through 12th grade were chronically absent, meaning they missed 10 percent or more school days." Rice (2016) contended that this increasing problem threatens student academic success and even high school graduation rates. These statistics are becoming increasingly more common throughout the United States and are no longer a dilemma faced only by urban schools. Hence, models like the Freshman Academy have taken care to create a more nurturing environment, geographically sheltered from the rest of the high school and looking to meet the individual needs of students in transition (Habeeb, 2013). A Freshman Academy must consider multiple components, which influence program success. These include issues related to the program's location, culture, teacher experience, disciplinary procedures, and program activities, to name a few. According to Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2010), creating a ninth-grade community of care must also focus on positive teacher–student relationships, teacher teaming for consistency, and emotional and cognitive support for this age group. These themes reappear throughout the research and form a baseline for Freshman Academy models.

Student connectivity and the nurturing academy environment. Freshmen academies, considered to be small learning communities, facilitate the transition process

by personalizing the high school experience in this first, important year. These small groups, or "houses," within the organization permit a more individualized and personalized approach to meeting the students' needs. Team teachers assigned to the house become aware of the strengths, weaknesses, and special needs of their smaller group within the freshmen class. This promotes a stronger relationship between teacher and student, allows for at-risk students to be identified and accommodated more rapidly, and permits the teaching of self-discipline and other social skills more readily (Emmett & McGee, 2012). Additionally, smaller learning groups provide more effective parent–teacher contact and make it easier to standardized expectations within the smaller group. The small learning group adheres to a teaming model, which is effective for easing the transition to high school (Habeeb, 2013). These elements are important for the creation of the caring, nurturing environment that promotes a student's sense of belonging and wellbeing, and thus promotes student connectivity to school (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). Connectivity to the academy is expected to increase student willingness to attend school more regularly and decrease chronic absenteeism. Because chronic absenteeism impacts student academic achievement, each of these three components, connectivity, attendance and academic success are all interrelated.

A component in promoting student belonging and connectivity to ninth grade centers on relationships. The students' relationships with peers and teachers are crucial to forming a positive perspective of high school. Peer relationship development becomes more significant in the middle school years and progressively increases into the high

school years. Healthy peer relationships can serve as a predictor for the student's adjustment in high school and should be nurtured to maintain this health (Kingery et al., 2011). Relationship development between students and teachers is equally important. Student perceptions of teacher support are an important element in the learning environment. However, high school typically presents new challenges such as self-determination and increased corrective comments and reduced individualized attention to the student, which may have a negative impact on the students' perception of teacher support (Bru et al., 2010). The Freshman Academy addresses the element of relationship and organizes the program into houses, which take on a family-like identity, with teachers being the leaders of the family.

Student diversity and success. Ninth-grade transition is considered one of the pivotal experiences in a person's education and life. Biological changes, social and emotional needs, and a fear of the unknown set the stage for even the most successful student to go off track. Advocates for ninth-grade transition programs or freshmen academies believe that the research of such programs meet the needs of freshmen students (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2012, 2013). The high school transition experience may differ in ecological environments. At-risk students who often have poor academic preparation in the primary and middle schools, and have excessive and chronic absenteeism as well (Curran-Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). These students require additional interventions and supports in order to be successful in their freshman year.

In comparison, ninth graders who participated in an accelerated freshmen curriculum, specifically an international baccalaureate (IB) program, "faced additional academic challenges than peers pursuing a typical high school curriculum, particularly with respect to performance expectations in multiple advanced classes" (Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013, p. 196). Students in programs such as these are exposed to higher levels of stress and anxiety; yet, many students reported superior mental health in comparison to their counterparts. Hence, freshmen transition programs are designed to address and adapt to students of varied learning and skill ability levels. The program is organized to identify individual learning abilities and styles and implement accommodations within the small learning communities to assist and compliment students' strengths and weaknesses.

Freshmen academies must adapt to the population, climate, and culture of a student group to best meet that group's needs. Surveys regarding student and teacher perceptions are helpful in providing evidence-based strategies for the development and evaluation of the freshmen transition program. In this study, student connectivity to school, student attendance, and academic achievement was examined as it is impacted by the Freshman Academy environment, culture, and practices.

Evaluability assessment. Evaluability assessments were introduced by Wholey in 1979. This form of assessment is conducted through interviews, observations, and document analysis in order to determine if a program is ready to undertake a formal program evaluation (Patton, 2015). In this study, the evaluability assessment and initial

program evaluation were conducted by me, as I served as an internal auditor. An internal

auditor conducts an evaluative assessment and program evaluation and may be best suited

to do so because it is a complex process which requires an "understanding of the political

and organizational context in which the program resides, and attention to subtleties in the

data" (Trevisan & Huang, 2003, p. 2). It is not uncommon for an internal evaluator to be

an employee of the organization being assessed, and often they are individuals whose

duties pertain to evaluation (Spaulding, 2014). As an administrator in the school where

the Freshman Academy presides, I have performed observations, assessments, and

evaluations of individuals, classes, and teaching strategies. However, in considering the

evaluability assessment of this ninth-grade transition program, precautions were

undertaken over 3 years ago when the program commenced. Understanding that the

program may require an evaluability assessment and program evaluation, I recused

myself from any authority over the academy. This included that of teacher selection,

policy creation, student discipline, teacher observation and evaluation either formative or

summative, and planning for program activities. In doing so, I remained as nonbiased as

possible, yet still maintain enough knowledge of the program, school culture, and

population to be an effective and knowledgeable internal evaluator. Additionally, the

board of education of the school district, who are one of the stakeholders in the academy,

approved the program evaluation to be completed. This was done only after Walden

University Review and Institutional review board (IRB) approvals had taken place.

Implications

The study of the freshmen transition experience, focusing on the needs of a particular age group and developmental period, is important in enhancing student success and motivating students toward regular attendance at school. This may also lead to higher passing rates of core curriculum subjects. A program evaluation of a 3-year implemented Freshman Academy in a rural New Jersey high school provided data regarding how student connectivity to a Freshman Academy impacted student attendance and student achievement in core curriculum subjects. Additionally, qualitative data collected in the field and existing archival data on student attendance and passing of core curriculum subjects provided additional insight leading to the improvement of the existing Freshman Academy in this school district. The resulting program evaluation has played a role in the program's changes and trajectory. This study facilitated the formative evaluation process, assisting the program in its continued development. In addition, the results from the program evaluation study may provide guidance and support to other schools considering implementing their own freshmen transition program. The program evaluation of this, and other freshmen academies, may influence positive social change affecting the freshmen transition experience, student attendance, and student academic success.

Summary

A growing number of school districts nationwide have identified chronic absenteeism as a cause of academic failure and a growing need for credit retrieval and dropping out at the high school level. The transition between eighth and ninth grade has

been considered one of the most critical transition points in an adolescent's educational journey. As a result, many public school districts have begun to implement freshmen transition programs such as freshmen academies to address the needs of ninth graders in order to improve student connectivity to school, student attendance, and achievement in core curriculum subjects.

A program evaluation of an existing Freshman Academy provided data regarding which elements of the transition program were effective in enhancing student connectivity and improving attendance, thereby increasing student academic achievement. It also provided formative assessment for program practices that are influential in these focus areas and which are not. Conducting an evaluation of this kind required qualitative data collection, including adult staff interviews, field notes from observations of student and staff interactions within the Freshman Academy, and a review of artifacts and archival data related to student attendance and academic achievement. This was accomplished with the assurance of confidentiality and protection of the student and teacher participants. In Section 2 of this study I outline the methodology, design, sampling, and data analysis aligned with the guiding research questions relative to this project study and program evaluation.

Section 2: The Methodology

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

The recent development and implementation of ninth-grade transition programs, often referred to as freshmen academies, are evidence of the widespread effort to address critical factors in the successful transition from eighth to ninth grade. Over the last decade, statistics related to student attendance, connectivity to school, behavioral referrals, student academic achievement, and graduation rates have been of concern (Benner, 2011; Emmett & McGee, 2012; Habeeb, 2013; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Among these, student connectivity to school and absenteeism are considered to be among the most impactful factors in student academic success. Brown (2015) stated, "A growing body of research has shown that children who miss more than 10 percent of the school year – about 18 days in most districts – are more likely to struggle academically and drop out" (p. #). The freshmen transition year into high school is viewed as one of the most critical pivotal points in a youngster's life. The transition encompasses changes in the student's physical, social, and emotional development and places greater expectations on the student with a new level of curricular rigor and independence (Curran-Neild, 2009). Freshmen academies were created to align with the pedagogical and theoretical ideals of small learning communities, in which the needs of adolescents are met in order to construct an environment of trust, support, and encouragement to be carried into the remaining high school years.

Examining the Freshman Academy Model

There are numerous models of freshmen transition programs throughout the nation (Abbott & Fisher, 2012; Chmelynski, 2004; Ellerbrock, 2012). Most share some common features such as teacher teaming and collaborative planning; a segregated geographical area of the school where the program takes place; and students divided into houses that have their own dedicated team of teachers, a guidance counselor, and, sometimes, a dedicated administrator. Many academies operate under the premise that these houses are individual small learning communities that provide students with personal developmental, social, and academic supports, which will facilitate their transition to high school and successful graduation at the end of 4 years. This study provided data on how the Freshman Academy model influenced student connectivity, thus affecting their attendance and ultimately their ability to succeed academically. There is a logical association between a student's connection to school and his or her regular attendance at school. Rice (2016) stated, "In fact, a ninth grader's school attendance is a better predictor of whether that student will drop out of high school than his/her eighth-grade test scores" (p. 28). Daily attendance at school is critical in improving student academic success, for without consistent exposure to peers, teachers, and the curriculum, a student loses opportunities for socializing, bonding, and assimilation into the new school environment. Instructional time and necessary teacher and peer interaction are essential to a student's healthy development and connection to school.

Student connectivity to the new school and environment depends on social bonds, social status, positive relationships with teachers, and involvement in extracurricular activities (Langenkamp, 2010). In examining the impact of these relationships, freshen academy adult staff shed light on how the student/teacher relationship is nurtured to foster mutual respect and trust. Additionally, in observations of interactions between students and adult academy staff, I demonstrated how these interactions impacted student connectivity, which may lead to improved attendance rates and greater student academic achievement. Finally, observing the climate and culture of the Freshman Academy and noting how it differs from the traditional ninth-grade school environment provided significant insight to how a ninth-grade transition program influenced freshmen students in transition.

The Program Evaluation

The Freshman Academy program evaluated completed its 3rd year of implementation in June 2016 and began a 4th year in the 2016-17 school year. The program conducted was in a rural New Jersey high school with a freshmen population of approximately 280 students. Like other freshmen transition programs, the stakeholders who created the program wanted to address issues of concern that were believed to manifest in the ninth grade. These concerns included, but were not limited to, student connectivity to school, chronic absenteeism, and failing grades in core curriculum subjects. The development and implementation of a Freshman Academy program was proposed to address these issues and combat chronic absenteeism and failing of core

curriculum subjects in the first year of high school. A formative evaluation of the

academy was approved in order to examine the process and outcomes of the program and

to better understand the program's strengths and weaknesses for further intervention and

development. This type of evaluability assessment is conducted through observations,

interviews, and review of artifacts to determine program effectiveness in reaching stated

objectives (Patton, 2015). A formative program evaluation was also used to examine

fluctuations in the data relative to student attendance and academic achievement to

identify sources of those fluctuations in order to attain consistency in program

improvements and gains.

In this program evaluation, the main focus and qualitative data collection were

that of teacher, administrator, and guidance counselor interviews. Most of the potential

teacher interviewees were freshmen teachers who taught both in the traditional freshmen

classroom environment as well as the newly implemented Freshman Academy

environment; therefore, their perceptions of the program's influence were most

noteworthy. Field observations provided supportive data to the interview data and, as the

program evaluator, I had the opportunity to see the students and teachers demonstrate

how the program influenced student connectivity, leading to improved attendance and

opportunities for enhanced academic success. Archival documentation regarding student

attendance and percentage of students' passing or failing core curriculum subjects was

reviewed for the 4-year period after the academy was implemented. Additionally,

archival survey data related to the Freshman Academy's student and teacher school

experience, collected by the school's board of education at the end of the 3rd year of program implementation, was reviewed for common themes. This survey documentation, as well as other archival data, aligned with collected qualitative data from interviews and observations of the program's participants and administrators, and thus, provided a third tool for analysis. Hence, a triangulation of data, which includes interviews, field observations of the Freshman Academy's student/teacher interactions, along with a review of archival documents, provided triangulation and the foundation for program evaluation.

<div align="center">**Participants**</div>

Settings

The freshmen classes in this rural New Jersey high school had averaged approximately 280-300 students over the last 3 years. The student population consisted of primarily middle to lower middle-class families, with the largest percentage being Caucasian and less than 5% of the overall enrollment being minority populations consisting of African American, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students. The school district consisted of four elementary schools housing Grades kindergarten through 6, a middle school housing Grades 7 and 8, and the high school housing Grades 9 through 12.

The high school's Freshman Academy was established in a more geographically secluded area of the high school, with direct access to the outside, restrooms, and office space. The intention was to have a wing of the school where freshmen would not have

exposure to upperclassmen and to have a place in which they took pride and called their own. Students were divided into three houses, which were academically heterogeneous with mainstreamed regular education and special education students, and which have dedicated teaching teams. Groups of students organized in houses were taught by team teachers in all core curriculum subjects. Physical education/health and elective classes were taught by designated teachers in these areas for all school students in Grades 9–12. However, most of the day was spent in the Freshman Academy wing, which is an environment that is conducive of teacher sharing and more personal knowledge of students and their families.

Freshman Academy teachers were selected by department supervisors for their knowledge and experience in working with freshmen students. The teaming of core curriculum teachers for each of the three houses was administratively organized, and common teacher planning time was established to promote teacher collaboration. Two guidance counselors and two administrators were added to the academy as unique, dedicated academy staff.

Sample Participants

The program evaluation used purposeful sampling of the 201 –2017 freshmen students and participating Freshman Academy teachers. The 2016-17 school year represented the 4th year of the program's implementation with approximately 236 freshmen students enrolled, 18 academy teachers, one guidance counselor, and two dedicated school administrators. Qualitative inquiry focuses on smaller samples with

greater depth than larger samples more commonly used in quantitative methods (Patton, 2015). Because participation of adult staff members in interviews was voluntary, it was expected that approximately half, or 11 staff members of the academy staff, would be included in the sample for interviews. However, a high percentage of teachers consented to be observed or interviewed. Students interacting with teachers in the field were not individually observed, interviewed, or questioned. It is recommended that guidelines related to qualitative research in the field include building and maintaining trust and rapport with participants, gathering different kinds of data using triangulating as often as possible and remaining open to and striving for a variety of thick, deep, and rich descriptions (Patton, 2015). Observations took place in the natural setting of the Freshman Academy, at random times, in order to observe a variety of academy activities, classes, and teacher/student interactions. At no time were students interviewed or questioned before, during, or after the teacher observations. Instead, I looked for minor and major themes to emerge during my taking of detailed field notes with regard to how academy teachers demonstrated their influence on their students' connection to school, and how it impacted their students' academic achievement. Because the sample population of approximately 20 teachers and professional staff was rather small, a good representation of staff were observed at one time or another during the field observations. Therefore, the sample participants, of whom represented information-rich individuals in this study, provided the most relative data in this program evaluation.

Student and Teacher Participant Protections

The program's inception was in the 2013-14 school year during my second year as an administrator in this high school. Much of the initial exploration of the idea of a Freshman Academy was conducted prior to that school year, and I was a party to that initial exploration. However, prior to the academy's implementation in the 2013-14 school year, I considered the Freshman Academy to be a potential area of doctoral study and as such, recused myself from any of the further planning, staffing, organizing, and supervision of the program. Because I am also an administrator in the high school, which houses this Freshman Academy, I, along with other school administrators, took precautions to assure my exclusion from the program, or having any authority over the freshmen students, teachers, or any stakeholders of the program. In order to protect all participants, I took additional precautions to remain recused from the program in its development, implementation, and annual staffing. I was not involved in the discipline or guidance of freshmen students, and I did not observe, evaluate, or have authority over any Freshman Academy staff. Staff members of the Freshman Academy were advised that they may volunteer to be interviewed, or may completely opt out, without fear of any reprisal. All participants were provided detailed information regarding the study, and I attained informed consent from all volunteer staff members who agreed to be observed or interviewed. Throughout the program evaluation process, I, as an internal auditor, continued to recuse myself from any administrative duties associated with the Freshman

Academy, and there were no interviews or observations of the program until after IRB approval.

The board of education, via the superintendent's and assistant superintendent's office, provided a letter granting permission to use collected archival data related to teacher and student school experience perspectives, Freshman Academy student attendance rates, and percentages of students' passing of core curriculum subjects over the 3-year period of 2013-2016 (see Appendix C). All archival data provided to me did not contain any names of the participants, and I maintained confidentiality of all documentation. Anonymity is important, and maintained this throughout the interview, observation, and field note taking process as well as the review of student and academy artifacts. According to Spaulding (2014), an internal evaluator in a school may be "responsible for establishing and working on databases to maintain student academic and behavioral data and using data to assist staff and administrators in improving practice" (p. 12).

My objective was to remain uninfluential in the program throughout the program's 3-year existence, and I maintained that position throughout the study In this manner, I was able to perform the program evaluation of the Freshman Academy successfully as an internal auditor in order to assist in the district leadership's assessment of the program's influence on student connectivity, attendance and student achievement.

Data Collection

An evaluation matrix was developed to assure that all necessary data were collected and analyzed appropriately (Spaulding, 2014). Interview data and data from observations and field notes were collected for coding and analysis. Existing documented, archival data including student attendance rates, student pass/fail percentages of core curriculum subjects, and anonymous Freshman Academy student and teacher survey data over a period of 3 years were analyzed to provide triangulation of data.

The program evaluation and study began with interview questions developed to align with the study research questions developed for academy teachers, guidance counselor, and administrators (see Appendix D). Next, I conducted field observations from an established protocol (see Appendix E). The field observations included Freshman Academy classes, activities, meetings, and teacher team sessions that provided qualitative data on student/teacher interaction, performance, and attitudes that affected connectivity, student attendance, and academic achievement. Qualitative data are afforded greater credibility and internal validity when there is triangulation of data, which provides depth and breadth to the program evaluation (Merriam & Merriam, 2009). Therefore, additional archival documentation, provided by the school, which included student attendance rates, grades, discipline, school experience, and perceptions survey data, as well as artifacts such as the school report card, student behavior referrals, and teacher and administrator notes on class activities was collected and reviewed as part of the data analysis. The

interviews, observations, archival data, and document sources provided rich qualitative,

triangulation of data for this program evaluation.

Interviews

First, interviews of the Freshman Academy teachers, administrators, and guidance

counselors were conducted. Interview questions, developed specifically for each of the

three aforementioned groups, focused on the participants' experiences in and perceptions

of the Freshman Academy, and aligned with the research questions in this study. These

interviews provided a baseline for collecting rich, qualitative data regarding the

program's impact on ninth graders, program progress, continued development, successes,

and failures. Potential interviewees received an e-mail explaining the purpose of the

study and inviting them to participate in an interview that would assist in the program's

further development and evaluation. The e-mail provided information about the

interview, including that it would be held at a mutually convenient time and would last

approximately 60 minutes. Further, participation was completely voluntary and no harm

or retaliation came to anyone who chose not to be interviewed. If the participant was

interested, they could check the box indicating their interest and return it to the program

evaluator. Upon receipt of an affirmative selection, a mutually convenient date and time

was scheduled for the interview. Additionally, interviews were held in a neutral

conference room in the high school to provide additional comfort for the interviewee. All

interviews were audiotaped with the participant's knowledge and were later transcribed

and coded for themes. Interviews were conducted only with academy teachers, guidance

counselors, and dedicated administrators volunteering to do so and no additional

influence was used to entice volunteers. Participants were provided a selection of dates

and times to be interviewed for further convenience. Member checking was made

available to interview participants, and open communication before and after interviews

and observations was also made available to address participant concerns or need for

clarification

Observations and field notes. I collected my field notes from observations in

rich, thick descriptions that followed a specific observation protocol (see Appendix E).

The process of observing and collecting valuable and insightful field notes was a critical

part of gathering qualitative data. All my descriptive field notes relating to the

Academy's events, activities, and people, along with my reflective field notes with my

personal thoughts were collected and reviewed as a continuous process (Creswell, 2012).

Archival data. I was given permission to use existing archival data that had been

collected by the high school while implementing the Freshman Academy (see Appendix

C). These data provided triangulation and valuable information relative to freshmen

student attendance and academic discipline referrals, which speaks to connectivity and

academic press. Percentages of students requiring credit retrieval in subsequent years of

high school were reviewed for informational purposes indicative of Freshman Academy

influence in students requiring or not requiring credit retrieval for failed courses. I

received additional permission to access and analyze the school's documented, archival

data resulting from an anonymous, online survey created by hired consultants at the Ohio

State University's Community and Youth Collaborative Institute in their College of

Social Work (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2013). The high school's board of education

commissioned and conducted the survey in June 2016, and I received permission to

analyze and disseminate the archival data to provide additional insight about teachers'

and students' school experiences and perceptions (see Appendix H).

In addition, archival data from school records were made available for further

analysis of students who had participated in the Freshman Academy over the previous 4

years. Archival data already collected for the first 3½ years of the Freshman Academy

were also reviewed for the program evaluation (see Appendix F).

Data Analysis

Triangulating in qualitative research may include the mixing of data, design, and

analysis approaches that can "generate creative mixed inquiry strategies that illustrate

variations on the theme of triangulation" (Patton, 2015, p. 248). I employed a pure

qualitative strategy using naturalistic inquiry, qualitative data collection, inductive and

content analysis, and creative synthesis. The qualitative data were organized into folders

representing the categories affecting student connectivity, attendance, and academic

achievement. Text was analyzed using color-coding for minor and major themes. The

analysis of data helped me determine which elements of the Freshman Academy were

most influential in improving student connectivity, attendance, and academic

achievement. I provided the school's board of education with the resulting program

evaluation report reflecting this analysis (see Appendix A).

Interviews

As the internal auditor in this program evaluation, I collected and analyzed qualitative data through interviews of Freshman Academy teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors. Interview questions included topics related to teacher support and resources, student support and resources, student management, regular and special education mainstreaming, team planning, student relationships and bonding activities, administrative and guidance support, community outreach, and academic progress (see Appendix D). The audiotaped interviews were professionally transcribed (see Appendix G) for word-for-word accuracy and coded for emerging minor and major themes derived through inductive analysis. Interview participants were not within the realm of my authority and could not be harmed by their participation and honesty.

Observations and Field Notes

Once the interview notes were analyzed and coded, I collected additional qualitative data by observing the Freshman Academy in the field. I used an observational protocol in which I first sought permission to observe scenarios including, but not limited to, classroom instruction, team teaching, common planning sessions, teacher/student interactions, Academy staff meetings, meetings with students, and Academy activities. Like the interview analysis, these notations, inclusive of my observational reflective notes and field notations, were organized, coded, and analyzed using inductive analysis and creative synthesis (Patton, 2015). I gave particular attention to emerging themes addressing or influencing student connectivity, attendance, and academic achievement.

According to Lodico, Spaulding, and Veogtle (2010), themes lend to the "big ideas" that "allow the researcher to examine the foreshadowed questions guiding the research" (p. 307).

Archival Data

Existing, documented archival data were analyzed to determine if these data supported the initial findings of the qualitative analysis of the interviews and the observations of the program. These data were content analyzed to uncover prior patterns of change (Patton, 2015) that existed in the Academy students' attendance and passing rates in core curriculum subjects. The archival data also included program artifacts, student discipline records, and the results of anonymous, online surveys completed by students and teachers of the Freshman Academy. I used these archival data to focus further on issues related to student connectivity, attendance, and academic achievement in the Freshman Academy in order to provide a program evaluation and program report.

<center>**Limitations of an Evaluation Study**</center>

A program evaluation is an evaluability assessment, and as such, limitations should be acknowledged and recognized (Trevisan & Huanf, 2003). One obvious concern in performing a program evaluation as an internal auditor is bias. As an educational administrator in the school that houses the Freshman Academy I evaluated, I was predisposed to the Academy's goals and progress. A limitation in this study is the potential for bias clouding my judgment while performing the data collection and analysis. I believe I limited that bias by not being one of the creators or policy writers for

the program. In addition, I have remained outside the realm of observation and evaluation since the program's inception in 2013. Still, to address additional potential for bias, I also collected and coded the qualitative data and organized my text thematically, with member-checking when possible. This thematic format is commonly used in qualitative reports (Lodico et al., 2010).

The benefit of this program evaluation outweighed this limitation, and the resulting program report from the evaluation of this Freshman Academy provided additional insight into program needs and areas for improvement. Further, the program evaluation provided the possibility of social change, as the findings will be shared with other schools that are looking to create a freshmen transition program of their own.

Data Analysis Results

Evidence of Quality

The data collected for this program study focused on three major areas. First were interviews of Freshman Academy teachers, administrators and a dedicated guidance counselor. Next, data were collected from field observations and detailed, rich field notes taken in the freshmen classrooms, the Freshman Academy section of the high school, Academy award assemblies, and extra-curricular activities that took place on school grounds. Finally, documented and archival data including surveys, previously collected data relevant to the Freshman Academy, and artifacts related to the Academy were collected to provide triangulation.

All interviews were audiotaped and sent for professional transcription. Upon their return, the interview transcriptions were color coded for emerging minor and major themes. These themes prompted the creation of a data matrix on an Excel spreadsheet, where specific comments and researcher notations were documented.

Next, I documented more than 100 hours of field observations describing teacher interactions with staff and students in the Academy. The field notes provided deep, rich descriptions of teacher communication and activity within the Freshman Academy. Again, minor and major themes emerged and were similarly color coded. To further support this documentation process, I maintained a journal in which I recorded specific times, dates, and places of observations, lending additional reflection after completing field observations. The journal reflections gave greater depth and breadth to the progressing study.

Finally, a collection and review of artifact and archival data was reviewed to provide triangulation. My journal notes were expanded to reflect this documented, archival and artifact data and were color coded and placed in the data matrix. The triangulation of relevant sources of data afforded validity to the study. Although I knew participant names, I never recorded them in the collection or analysis of data. Instead, numbers were assigned for participant identification on all research documents. All documented and catalogued data were maintained in a locked file cabinet, and any digital data access required my personal passcode for retrieval.

Using a pure qualitative strategy and naturalistic inquiry, the collected data were analyzed through inductive and content analysis and creative synthesis (Patton, 2015). As the data matrix developed throughout the study, major, minor, and subthemes emerged and were aligned with the guiding research questions. The overall research question for this study focused on how the participants of this study described or demonstrated the effectiveness of the Freshman Academy, specifically in the areas of student connectivity, student attendance, and academic achievement. Data analysis was aligned with the research questions to examine what teachers, administrators and guidance counselors perceived as influential to these three areas, and, as well, how they demonstrated their own influence in these three areas.

Overview of the Findings

  Interviews. A letter of informed consent was sent to 21 potential participants representing 18 Freshman Academy teachers, two dedicated administrators, and one dedicated guidance counselor (see Appendix D). Of this sample, 14 Freshman Academy teachers consented to participate, 12 of whom also agreed to be interviewed. Additionally, both dedicated administrators and the single dedicated guidance counselor consented to participate in the study and to be interviewed. The result yielded a sample participant pool 17 out of a possible 21 individuals, providing a strong representation for the study.

  Interviews were conducted over a period of 3 weeks, and participants were provided the opportunity to select a convenient time and an on-site, neutral place to be

interviewed. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by a bonded and licensed transcription company. Interviewees were permitted to member check as requested. Five participants took advantage of member-checking, which led to some additional discussion and further validation of their thoughts and perceptions. The transcripts were carefully analyzed through color-coding of major and minor themes that emerged from the interviews (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, the major themes of student connectivity, student attendance, and student achievement in the Freshman Academy gave way to sub-themes, which included matters of social climate and culture, relationship building, family and community outreach, teacher teaming and collaboration, student academic and special needs support, behavior modification, and civic and social responsibility.

An important notation is that the interviews, which are often the first phase in a program evaluation, provided a baseline for initial theme emergence. The themes and patterns revealed in the interviews were also reflected in the observation field notes taken in phase two of the study. Rich descriptions of teachers' efforts to create and maintain a community-like environment, interactions which depicted student nurturing and relationship building, and provisions for individualized academic assistance supported the prevailing themes in the interview process. Similarly, the archival data retrieved from the June 2016 anonymous survey provided further analysis for student and teacher perceptions of the Academy that were relevant to this study, and supported the major and minor themes. This triangulation of data revealed common elements that influence student connectivity, attendance and academic achievement in the Freshman Academy,

which are the guiding elements in the research questions and are aligned with the

conceptual framework in this study.

      Observations. Observational data were collected daily over a period of 7 weeks,

with an average of 15 to 18 hours of observation per week. Observational field notes,

descriptions, and reflections provided enhancement to the analyzed data from the

participants' interviews. Thick, rich descriptions from the field delivered a more detailed

perspective of what the participants did in the Freshman Academy that made an impact

on students in the areas of connectivity to school, thus influencing student attendance and

academic success. In the field, teachers, administrators and the guidance counselor were

observed interacting with students and each other. The Freshman Academy consisted of

three "houses" of heterogeneous teacher and student teams: the white, blue, and gold

teams, which represent the school's three colors. All three organized team houses were

observed.

      Field observation arenas included the Freshman Academy classrooms and

hallways, assemblies, and Academy activities held on campus, but outside of the

Academy facility. Additionally, consenting staff participants permitted me to observe

their team meetings and common planning times. Qualitative data collected at these

meetings provided an exclusive view of how teacher teaming and collaboration improved

the teachers' intimate knowledge of their students and enhanced teaching and assessment

consistency among and between the three houses. According to Habeeb (2017), a pioneer

in ninth-grade transition programming, teams of core curriculum subject teachers are

essential for easing the transition to high school. Crucial to the ninth-grade transition programming are the staff meetings and common planning time, which provide a place to share and collaborate regarding students' needs (Habeeb, 2013).

Throughout the varied situational field observations, previously evolved themes that arose in the interviews reemerged, and a clearer picture began to develop regarding how the Freshman Academy's climate and culture, teaching, and student support strategies affected students' sense of belonging and well-being. Researchers involved in high school transition studies have consistently indicated that a student's sense of belonging and well-being are directly linked to student connectivity and achievement motivation (Biag, 2014; Ellerbrock, 2012; Habeeb, 2013; Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2009). In this study, the Freshman Academy appeared as a small learning community, a model responsible for creating a more trusting, intimate, and nurturing environment in which to teach and care for ninth graders. This single element became one of the most significant themes influencing student connectivity and the potential success of a ninth-grade transition program. Teacher/staff and student perceptions of student connectedness was measured in the CAYCI school survey using relevant constructs as shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Teachers' Perception of Students' Sense of Belonging

Student School Connectedness

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that students feel a sense of belonging to the school.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Students enjoy coming to this school.	4.27	0%	0%	7%	60%	33%	0%	0%
Students have meaningful relationships with teachers.	4.53	0%	0%	0%	47%	53%	0%	0%
Students are proud to be students at this school.	3.93	0%	0%	20%	67%	13%	0%	0%
Students feel like they belong to this school.	4.07	0%	7%	7%	60%	27%	0%	0%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always).

Table 2

Students' Perception of Students' Sense of Belonging

School Connectedness

This scale assesses the overall perceptions of students' school experiences.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Response
I enjoy coming to school.	3.98	0%	4%	20%	47%	27%	2%
I am proud to be a student at my school.	4.02	0%	0%	22%	51%	24%	2%
I feel like I belong at my school.	4.05	0%	0%	20%	53%	24%	2%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Archival data and artifacts. The Ohio State University's Community and Youth Collaborative Institute (CAYCI) were the consultants hired to create the Freshman Academy survey for the school district's board of education. The organization's survey leadership consulted with the school district to personalize the survey to collect data related to teacher and student perceptions of their Freshman Academy (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2013). The survey was launched as on online, anonymous survey and was made available to all Academy teachers and students, past and present. In total, 22 teachers and 239 students participated in the survey. The district contracted for and purchased the rights to survey data analysis and results relative to this study in the form of tables and charts, and are found throughout this study and in the appendices. All rights and permission were granted for use and publication (see Appendix H). Student and teacher survey results were provided in the forms of tables and charts (see Appendices I and J).

Teacher, staff, and student perceptions of the program provided greater depth of understanding regarding what may have influenced student success or failure. The survey results were outlined in accordance with four major pathways of influence. These included an academic learning pathway, school climate and youth development pathway, nonacademic barriers pathway, and a family engagement and community environment pathway. The four pathways of influence also listed underlying components affecting each, and tables and charts displaying the data were included for review. Survey professionals focused on these pathways to provide specific genres for in-depth Freshman Academy assessment of the influence the Freshman Academy model may have had on

the ninth-grade transition experience. The CAYCI survey pathway constructs and all

supporting charts and tables are included in the appendices. The demographics of the

teachers, staff and students participating in the CAYCI survey are identified in Figures 1

and 2.
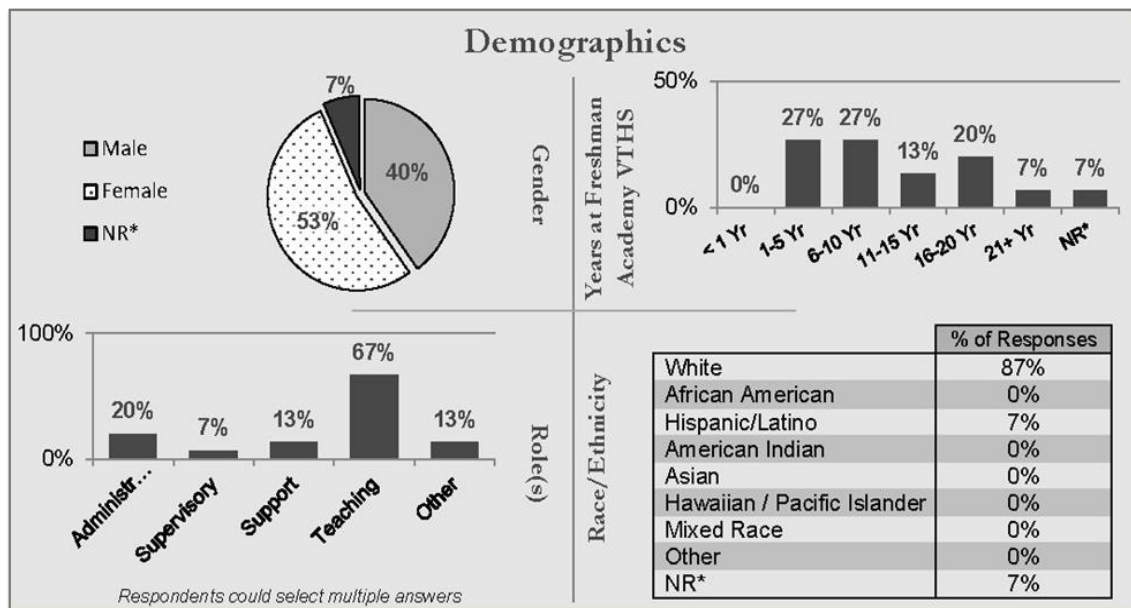
Figure 1. Demographics of Freshman Academy teachers/staff participating in the survey.

Demographics

20%

☐ Female
☐ Male
■ NR*

51%

29%

Gender

	% Responses
White	71%
African American	0%
Hispanic/Latino	4%
Asian	0%
Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	0%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2%
Multiracial	2%
Other	0%

Race/Ethnicity
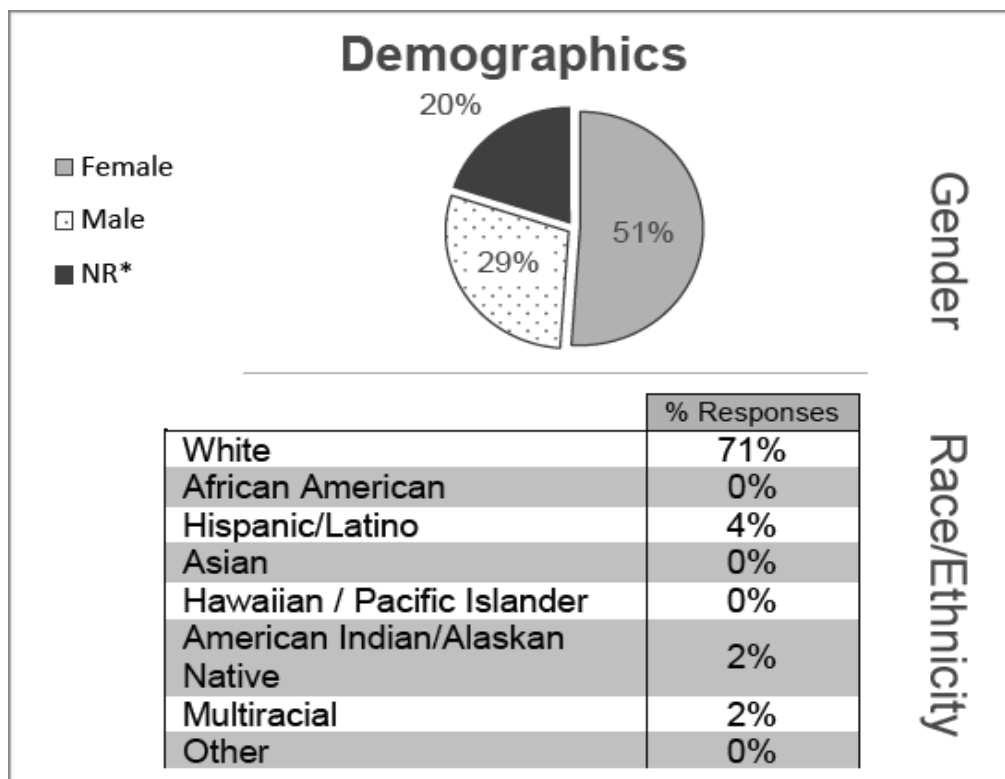
Figure 2. Demographics of Freshman Academy students participating in survey.

The 2015-16 Freshman Academy teachers and students were the group largely represented in the online surveys for their perspectives regarding the Academy, as the survey was conducted at the end of that school year. Clearly depicted in the demographic data is the limited diversity in ethnicity in this school district, which is in a rural county in New Jersey that is largely White. However, in the last decade, the ethnic diversity began to change and more Hispanic, Latino, and multiracial families began to move into this community. A similar study in a more diverse school district would more than likely yield different results.

Additional archival and statistical data already collected by the school district regarding the Freshman Academy since its inception in the 2013-14 school year were among the sources providing triangulation of the qualitative data that were collected and analyzed in this study. The school district had collected data regarding class size, student class attendance, absenteeism, suspensions, detentions, and passing/failing rates in core curriculum subjects in the last freshmen class before the Academy implementation, and the 3½ years after the Academy's implementation. The district's stakeholders believed attendance and academic success are critical areas for Freshman Academy influence, and these data were considered to be important in that assessment. The data included the school years of 2012-13 (last year before Academy implementation), 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16, and half of the 2016-17 school year.

Table 3

VTHS Freshman Academy Archival Data 2012-2017

Frosh Class by Freshman Academy Year	Total Number of Frosh Students in September of Frosh Year	Average Daily Class Attendance	Total Days of Absence as Frosh Class	Number of Frosh Suspended (Admin. Induced Absence)	Number of Frosh receiving Detention (Connectivity)	Number of Frosh Failing Core Courses for the year
*2012-13	282	92.47	2338	14	152	101
2013-14	276	95.34	1899	3	85	98
2014-15	237	95.37	1874	4	49	66
2015-16	256	94.89	1769	6	42	67
2016-17	236	91.05	1430	10	51	53

*denotes last Frosh class before Freshman Academy implementation

Note. Retrieved from VTHS Powerschool records, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017.

Additional artifact data shared by the Freshman Academy staff or discovered during field observations included lesson plans, freshmen projects, Freshman Academy family orientation details, and extra-curricular activity offerings, which were all unique and significant to the Academy. Each of these artifacts demonstrated alignment with the identified themes in teacher influence in the areas of individualized student attention, creation of the nurturing, community-like environment, and the house-teams' commitment to consistency in teaching, assessment and student support. The artifacts were also supportive and representative of the grounded theory in adolescent social development, self-efficacy (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and stage-environment fit (Gutman & Eccles, 2007), in that the activities, lesson plans and student offerings enhanced these developing qualities. One specific, influential artifact uncovered included how students were provided recognition and awards based upon the elements of the "Pyramid of Success" (Wooden & Carty, 2015). There are different models of character education, and this model was selected by the Academy's stakeholders to be embedded in the program's monthly lessons to guide the social and ethical messages that are grounded in the Freshman Academy.

All artifact, archival and documented data provided clarity and depth to the study and greatly enhanced this program evaluation. Artifact data often unearths subtleties not often revealed in other qualitative data forms (Creswell, 2009).

Patterns and Themes

Reoccurring themes emerged throughout the project study that appeared to influence student connectivity, student absenteeism, and academic achievement. Minor themes affecting these major themes were identified and patterned throughout the interviews, observations, and documented data. Significant minor themes were unveiled through the analyses of the data. They included peer and teacher relationship building, the organizational structure of teams and houses, common planning time, student resources and academic assistance, implementation of chrome book initiative, student discipline, student recognition, character education, and community outreach. Each of the major and minor themes are discussed in detail in this section.

Student connectivity. All participants referred to student connectivity to school as being one of the most critical factors in the transitioning ninth-graders' experience. There was consensus that without a freshmen student "buying in" to the program and making connections to their new school environment, regular attendance and academic achievement would be negatively impacted. A body of research links high school dropout rates to the ninth-grade experience (Benner, 2011; Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2007; Pharris-Clurej, Hirschmen & Willhoft, 2012; Roderick, Kelley-Kemple, Johnson & Beechum, 2014). Students who feel welcomed and a part of their school will more likely attend school, and, thus, become connected. Connectivity generally leads to improved attendance and academic achievement. Throughout the interview and field observation processes, specific supporting, minor themes became evident that addressed

how the Freshman Academy program was designed to support and encourage student

connectivity to school. One female Freshman Academy teacher I interviewed stated:

> The most important thing we have to do in the first weeks of school is to get kids
>
> to like their school. If they like school and feel like the teachers care about them,
>
> they will come to school and buy into our family as freshman teachers and
>
> students.

> Throughout the observation process, it was apparent that this was accomplished

through consistent teacher and student positive communication and interaction. It was

common to hear words of praise, like "well done," or "you're awesome!" Corrective

comments were offered in a less judgmental and more collaborative manner. For

example, a teacher's reprimand sounded more like, "What could you have done

differently?" or "I think you owe that person an apology because I know you're better

than that." The relationships between students and Academy teachers were clearly

influential to students' behavior and sense of belonging to the Academy. The climate and

culture of the Academy was one of mutual respect, kindness, patience, and overall caring.

Interviewed teachers and the dedicated guidance counselor indicated that they often used

one-to-one individual attention to a student needing academic assistance, encouragement,

or emotional support. Relationship building is an essential component in enhancing

student connectivity and it is done effectively when teams of teachers can get to know

their students much more intimately than if they had all the freshmen class blended

(Beland, 2014; Habeeb, 2013), as in the traditional fashion. Hence, houses of students and teacher teaming were influential in relationship building.

Relationship building among freshmen peers is equally important to the ninth-graders' connectedness to school. A ninth-grader's ability to make friends and identify with a social group is central to self-esteem and a feeling of well-being (Chung-Do et al., 2013). Teachers identify students struggling with peer acceptance or engaging in inappropriate peer interaction, and the entire team discusses interventions to help the student in a holistic manner. Conferences with the student to discuss behavior modification are done proactively and not punitively. Restorative discipline is practiced when students are engaged in discussions that make them answer important questions regarding why something happened, and how it could be prevented in the future (Dublin, 2016). Discipline is restorative and mediation between students is facilitated by the teacher team in the Freshman Academy. Mediation for reflection is an important process for adolescents who are just learning the consequences and rewards of their decisions and actions. When students engage in conversations with their teachers and peers regarding offenses committed, they are more likely to begin to understand the impact their actions make on others. In the Freshman Academy, students learn conflict resolution and problem-solving skills, rather than engaging in adversarial behavior that destroys student relationship building. This enhances not only a student's ability to make friends but to resolve conflicts in a healthier manner.

Freshmen transition program models have built-in platforms to raise student self-awareness, self-confidence, and validation. In the Academy studied, freshmen assemblies are conducted monthly to recognize students for demonstrating leadership qualities taught in the Pyramid of Success (Wooden & Carty, 2015), which is embedded in the freshmen curriculum and addresses personal character and social virtues. The Pyramid of Success is posted in every classroom and the qualities are taught as an important part of the Academy culture. Teachers may choose famous quotes and sayings, supporting stories, video clips, music, or art that depict the quality being taught. Students and teachers openly discuss how individuals embody these qualities of character, and freshmen are encouraged to embrace these examples and strive to model them at school and at home. Those students who successfully demonstrate the qualities taught for the month are recognized by their teachers at their monthly Academy assembly and provided an award certificate for demonstrating this quality at school. They have their picture taken, and it is placed on the "Wall of Success" for that month. Students seem proud when they are selected for one of several Pyramid of Success awards. In the center hallway of the Freshman Academy wing, a large glass display of pictures of student monthly award winners is there for all to see. Each month the pictures are updated with new recipients, and students look forward to being chosen. Recognition is a key factor is student validation and connectivity to their school.

The Pyramid of Success

The triangle contains the following tiers:

Top: **Competitive Greatness** — Be at your best when your best is needed. Enjoyment of a difficult challenge.

Poise — Just be yourself. Being at ease in any situation. Never fighting yourself.

Confidence — Respect without fear. May come from being prepared and keeping all things in proper perspective.

Condition — Mental-Moral-Physical. Rest, exercise and diet must be considered. Moderation must be practiced. Dissipation must be eliminated.

Skill — A Knowledge of and the ability to properly and quickly execute the fundamentals. Be prepared and cover every little detail.

Team Spirit — A genuine consideration for others. An eagerness to sacrifice personal interests of glory for the welfare of all.

Self-Control — Practice self-discipline and keep emotions under control. Good judgement and common sense are essential.

Alertness — Be observing constantly. Stay open-minded. Be eager to learn and improve.

Initiative — Cultivate the ability to make decisions and think alone. Do not be afraid of failure, but learn from it.

Intentness — Set a realistic goal. Concentrate on its achievement by resisting all temptations and being determined and persistent.

Industriousness — There is no substitute for work. Worthwhile results come from hard work and careful planning.

Friendship — Comes from mutual esteem, respect and devotion. Like marriage it must not be taken for granted but requires a joint effort.

Loyalty — To yourself and to those depending upon you. Keep your self-respect.

Cooperation — With all levels of your co-workers. Listen if you want to be heard. Be interested in finding the best way, not in having your own way.

Enthusiam — Brushes off those with whom you come into contact. You must truly enjoy what you are doing.

Side labels: Faith (Through prayer), Patience (Good things take time), Fight (Determined effort), Integrity (Purity of intention), Resourcefulness (Proper judgment), Reliability (Creates respect), Adaptability (To any situation), Honesty (In thoughts and actions), Ambition (For noble goals), Sincerity (Keeps friends).

3*Note.* From "Coach Wooden's Pyramid of Success," by J. Wooden & J. Carty, 2015.

Another influential component in promoting student connectivity are the freshmen social events and activities conducted throughout the school year. In the summer before the eighth graders transition to the high school, a freshmen orientation is conducted at the high school. This is a fun event, and almost all rising freshmen and their teachers attend. Senior student ambassadors are present to serve as "big brothers and sisters" to incoming freshmen. White, blue, and gold team shirts are distributed to all the students, who have already been placed in teams, which will become their Academy House. Teachers wearing the same team shirts are introduced to their students. The

atmosphere resembles a pep rally, and activities, games, and a barbeque are all part of this event. Students socialize within the newly created teams and get a tour of the high school and the Freshman Academy section as the new home base for the Academy. They are issued their class schedules and lockers and are given time to meet with and talk to their teachers, if they so choose. This 3-hour event is the students' introduction to their Freshman Academy, and the day is upbeat and intended to breakdown walls or fears associated with that first day of high school. The male dedicated administrator to the Freshman Academy interviewed stated, "Freshman orientation day is meant to be a fun and exciting event. We focus on the Academy family and make the day less about requirements and rules, and more about how great high school can be." Data collected from the teacher interviews and the school's survey indicated that the freshman orientation and similar social events were a very successful way to introduce and highlight the program, and teachers believed that these events remove a great deal of anxiety and worry associated with the ninth-grade transition.

Student attendance. Chronic absenteeism is a national problem (Beattie, Rich, & Evans, 2015; Brown, 2015; Rice 2016). This dilemma is particularly magnified in the transition years found in Grade 5 to Grade 6 in intermediate schools, Grade 6 to 7 in middle schools, Grade 8 to 9 in high schools, and in Grade 12 into the freshmen year of college. The transition experience is often one that triggers anxiety because of fear of the unknown. When an adolescent or young adult must leave behind the familiar to venture out into the unfamiliar, it is a challenging life-hurdle. Increased absenteeism is often a by-

product of the heightened emotions associated with going to a new school with new teachers and schedules. Transition experiences can become more comfortable and less frightening when certain priorities are in place. Promoting a feeling of belonging, as if in a family, is a primary goal within the Freshman Academy model. In a small learning community such as this, teachers become trusted confidants, private tutors and emotional supporters for their students. Observing the Freshman Academy teachers interact with their students is resembles watching a parent interact with his or her child. There is kindness, caring, and patience, as well as tough love, guidance, instruction, and when needed, correction. I observed an after-school tutoring session between a female Academy math teacher and a female freshman student. The session began as an opportunity to explain a recent math lesson that the student stated she had some difficulty with. However, the conversation quickly transformed into a counseling session about the student's recent poor decisions regarding social media. It was evident that Academy teachers use teachable moments wherever and whenever possible, and students are open to these discussions because they trust the teachers. Once again, this demonstrated that relationship building and trust are important elements in the Academy, and the grouping of students into the small learning communities truly lends to a more intimate relationship between and among students and their teachers. This climate creates a sense of security that is conducive to learning. When students feel cared for, they want to come to school (Warner & Heindel, 2016). In some cases, teachers indicated that their school

environment was more nurturing than some of the students' home environments, making

school a safe and secure place.

Behavior issues are dealt with somewhat differently that in the traditional format

in high school. Students who misbehave or make poor choices that affect their learning

are provided an opportunity to reflect on their choice and contemplate better reactions

and choices in the given scenario. A behavior modification template is used and provides

the misbehaving student with a simple worksheet to use during a private time of

reflection. Once the student has been given this reflection and cool-off period, a trusted

teacher joins the process to discuss what happened, asking the student to walk through

the outcome of their actions. The objective is not punitive but rather to foster honesty and

accountability. The teacher and the student discuss what changes could have been made

to avoid the outcome, and ultimately, discuss realistic alternatives attainable by that

student. The discussion is based in a solution-oriented manner and judgement is not a part

of the process. Most students can utilize this time effectively to come up with better ways

of dealing with their dilemma, and cooperation and honesty is understood to yield a lesser

consequence. A male Academy teacher interviewed stated his thoughts on the modified

discipline practices for freshmen:

> Freshmen are still so immature in comparison to the other grades. They are
>
> impulsive and do things without thinking. We give them time to think, reflect and
>
> decide how they could do it over. This really helps them to make a better decision
>
> the next time.

The behavior modification process is influential for many freshmen students, and for those who do not have success, additional strategies are used with the help of a guidance counselor or administrator to guide them. Somtimes a parent may be called to join the process, but even then, the goal is to assist the student, and parent if needed, through a process of recognizing that there are better choices to help the student feel understood and to be successful. This distinctive behavior modification process influences a ninth-grader's desire to attend school, without fear of swift justice without due process, embarrassment of corporal punishment.

As previously discussed, the mini-lessons are based on Wooden's Pyramid of Success (Wooden & Carty, 2015), which highlight important character qualities. These are used to reinforce student choices that affect behavior management—not just in the moment but as a process for making good choices. A Pyramid of Success class activity could take the form of a competitive interaction among students in the classroom. An observed lesson about social media responsibility asked students to time themselves in trying to pump as much hand lotion as they could out of a small pump bottle. Some students were asked to wear blindfolds, while others wore socks on their hands. A third of the students had no "handicapping" situation at all. As expected, those who were handicapped by the props could not pump out the lotion as effectively as the non-handicapped students. However, when the time was called, the teacher announced that the contest had not ended and that the real test was how much of the lotion could be put back in the bottle. Those who did not pump much out were the actual winners. This

exercise symbolically demonstrated what happens when young people put too much questionable or personal information about themselves out on social media, and this discussion followed the activity. The teacher indicated that once something is put out in cyberspace, it is hard, if not impossible, to take it back, and so the true winners were those who did not pump out that much at all. The lesson focused on two Pyramid of Success qualities, specifically "alertness" and "self-control." These and other activities that are implemented to promote civic and social responsibility and develop character are age appropriate, and the messages are well received.

Character education has become a focal point in many of the nation's schools to attempt to reshape the negative messages that our youth receive from the media and internet (Goss & Holt, 2014). Academy teachers indicated that when their students felt respected and validated, they were more likely to be open to character education, which teachers believed was an essential element in a ninth-grade transition program. Most of the teachers I interviewed believed the improved attendance rates among freshmen students resulted, in part, from the character lessons and awards. These lessons do not single out or place judgement on individual students, and hence, are believed to increase attendance at school.

Student academic success. Academic success is forged through many strategies and approaches found in the Academy. Academy teachers and administrators agreed that regular attendance was crucial to student academic success. Clearly, when students are not in school, they miss lessons and classwork, which affect their understanding, skill

mastery and ultimately their academic success. However, the subthemes that were also significant in student academic success related to the individualized attention that arises in a house or team- taught groupings. The house provides a support system that can offer one-to-one attention and includes collaborative teachers that work closely together and know their students' needs well. In this manner, a student's individual needs are met through team cooperation and collaboration (Habeeb, 2013). Often, during a team meeting or a common planning time, teachers would discuss a particular student's recent struggle, only to find that it was happening in other classes as well. This would initiate team exploration to determine if any were aware of a recent family crisis, school conflict, or academic deficiency that may require the attention of the school social worker or Child Study Team. In these professional conversations, the team teachers discussed methods of differentiation that may have worked for one teacher, and so, the team and students benefit from this collaboration of ideas and strategies for teaching and learning.

The freshmen class of 2016-17 was the current class that underwent the program evaluation, and was the first Freshman Academy class to have come to the high school with an implanted one-to-one Chromebook initiative. The students in this class had this initiative introduced in the seventh grade, and so it was a new component in the Freshman Academy in September 2016. Research has supported using one-to-one laptops or Chromebooks for students as a means of exposing them to the global learning environment in which they will work as adults (Rosen & Beck-Hill, 2012). Interview and observation data collected in this study indicated that there are perceived positive and

negative outcomes from the Chromebook initiative, and the use is still being defined in terms of appropriate implementation at the high school level. Students must be closely monitored to assure appropriate use of the devices in the classroom, and some of the teachers believed it may reduce group, face-to-face collaboration, and communication. Teacher teams and department supervisors continue to explore this issue and develop new strategies to make the chrome book initiative a successful one. While attending a teacher professional development session introducing new software to monitor Chromebook activity, I learned of the "GoGuardian" software that was being demonstrated to the staff. The software was being provided to assist the teachers in monitoring the sites and links in which their students were visiting during class sessions. The software program also provided a component for blocking certain sites during the class lesson. The hope was that the Chromebook initiative could be more successful if student off-task usage was limited.

To help students who need remedial help, or to afford extra time for gifted students, all of the core curriculum subject teachers select days that they will remain after school to offer remediation or provide enrichment to students. Additionally, students are provided extended time after school to complete assignments. Academy teachers rotate days that they stay after school and make themselves available during team time to meet with and assist their students. Endeavoring to meet individual needs is commonplace in the Freshman Academy. Students are permitted, even encouraged, to retake a failed assessment once they have had an opportunity to access help and gain greater

understanding of the material. During the teacher interviews, one female teacher stated, "Why shouldn't we let them take a test over? The objective is to let them see what they are doing wrong, master the skill and then show proficiency, not to give a bad grade before that happen." This practice promotes confidence in students who are struggling and provides alternate opportunities for being successful. The intimate relationship between teacher and student is greatly enhanced when small learning communities are formed and each of its members know one another well (Ellerbrock, 2012).

Finally, the dedicated administrators and dedicated guidance counselor are completely invested and committed to the Freshman Academy staff and program. These on-site professionals are important to the program's success. Interviewed staff members overwhelmingly agreed to the positive impact made by dedicated administrators and supporting staff, including special education teachers, the child study team, and the guidance counselor. A female teacher stated, "This is a team approach, and we support one another with our students. Since we are in a house model, we know our students very well and can share strategies that worked for a student." However, a recent change in principal leadership affected a change in the Freshman Academy lead administrator position. Most teachers I interviewed stated that the newly appointed Academy lead administrator does not have an office in the high school building and is not present in the Academy every day, as did the last administrator. The staff suggested this greatly affected the visible investment of this individual, and the Academy has experienced some communication and collaboration issues as a result. Teachers in the Academy are highly

motivated self-starters. However, there was notably more productivity when the on-site administrator visited and guided the program, as compared with when no administrator visited the Academy each day. In the program evaluation, this was a point for suggested stakeholder investigation, discussion, and improvement. The interplay of administrative support for staff, staff support of students and the Academy's support of families is a critical and delicate balance. A successful ninth-grade transition program must pay close attention to maintaining this balance.

In summary, it was evident that teachers perceived their actions, relationships, teaching strategies, behavior modification practices and community outreach as most influential in affecting student connectivity, attendance, and academic achievement. Social learning theory supports that adolescents require provisions that assist in their healthy social, emotional, physical, and educational development. Ninth-grade students are perhaps at the most vulnerable stage of this development, and their transition from middle school to high school is possibly the most challenging of all the school years. In this formidable year, motivation, self-efficacy, and self-determination is fostered through nurturing relationships and positive behavior reinforcements intended to create a feeling of safety and well-being for the students. This climate enhances student self-image and cultivates a connectivity to school that may improve student attendance and, thus, academic achievement. In providing a culture and climate of acceptance and student validation, the social, emotional and educational needs of ninth graders are more thoroughly and aptly met.

Freshman Academy teachers, staff, and administrators aspired to the "village raising the child" philosophy, wherein every individual coming in contact with the student can make a difference. The teachers and Freshman Academy supporting staff's perceptions and behavior in the Freshman Academy embraced social learning theory and the developing adolescent. They worked as a team, shared and collaborated on teaching and learning strategies, and fostered a nurturing environment where students felt valued and important. Additionally, survey results revealed that teachers in the Academy have high regard for the Freshman Academy, and see their influence on students as positive in the areas of promoting student connectivity, providing a safe and appropriate environment for learning.

The teachers, administrators, and guidance counselor uniformly interacted and communicated with the ninth graders in a manner that uplifted students' self-esteem, providing guidance and positive messages to the students, even when corrective action was required. These student and staff relationships and attitudes played a significant role in student connectivity, attendance and thus, academic achievement. As a result, Academy professionals adopted practices that demonstrated their belief that every element of the Academy impacts student success, and the goal is to make that impact positive in every sense.

The observations, interviews, and documented artifacts in the program study revealed important themes to be addressed in the program evaluation. They included Academy relationship building and how the organizational structure of teams and houses

supported communication between and among teachers and students. These are perhaps the two most critical factors influencing the successful ninth-grade transition model. Additional consideration was given to how common planning time promoted collaborative sharing and academic consistency, the importance of dedicated administrators and guidance counselors, the impact of student recognition and character education in the Academy, the need for family/community outreach, and a discussion of how district leadership may support program sustainability. Each phase of the research yielded pertinent information in developing the final program evaluation provided to the stakeholders of the Freshman Academy program.

Section 3: The Project

The transition from eighth to ninth grade is perhaps the most impactful and influential transition in a person's school career. Adolescents of this age group are vulnerable on many levels as they are experiencing physical, emotional, and social changes in their lives. During this confusing and challenging time in life, they must leave the comfort of their elementary experience to move on to an academic environment that is different and often, fear provoking. The ninth-grade transition marks a time where students will take credit-based classes for which they are required to pass in order to graduate. Additionally, they will need to manage their time effectively and become more organized and independent in their work. The new school environment, and the demands associated with high school, will require greater student commitment and responsibility. Additionally, social relationships in the adolescent years become complicated and more important. Not only is there concern about fitting in to a social group, but the freshmen student will place greater value on relationships with peers than that of their teachers and parents. The social implications of high school may be more daunting than the academic challenges which lie ahead, and the unknown of both can be frightening and anxiety producing.

In order to address the dynamics that are involved in the freshmen transition experience, high schools from around the nation are researching and implementing freshmen transition programs that are designed to facilitate every aspect of this experience. Student connectivity to school, attendance, and academic achievement are

considered critical to student success. In one Northeastern New Jersey high school, educational leaders agreed to rethink their mission and address the freshmen transition experience in their high school. In order to do so, freshmen transition program models would be researched and best practices in freshmen transition programs would be adopted in creating and implementing their own freshmen program. A committee of stakeholders was formed and an entire year was dedicated to the research in realizing this goal.

In the 2013-14 school year, the district's leadership launched a Freshman Academy for their transitioning ninth graders. In the process, a geographically strategic section of the high school was cornered off to house the academy; teaching and support personnel were hand-selected; and curricula, policies, and practices that addressed the needs of freshmen were put in place. In the program's 3rd year, data collected by the school regarding student attendance and academic achievement seemed promising; yet, there had been no formal evaluation of the program to understand what successes were realized or which needs still existed. The committee reconvened and discussed the value of a formative program evaluation for the purpose of providing further data regarding the program's strengths and weaknesses, thereby enhancing the program's impact and sustainability.

As a doctoral student in the district, I discussed my interest in exploring the possible project study and program evaluation of the Freshman Academy. The objective would be to collect data and perform a program evaluation to inform the stakeholders of the program's impact on freshmen. The freshman year is considered to be the trajectory

platform for the remaining high school years. The district's leadership and board of education agreed that a program evaluation was in order. Having had no influence or supervision over the program, the policies, freshmen students, or the Freshman Academy staff, I created a proposal to be an internal auditor evaluating the school district's Freshman Academy. After completing an initial, but thorough literature review, it was clear that many factors contribute to the success or failure of a ninth-grade transition program. However, three factors that appeared to be most impactful in the success of a freshmen transition program included how the program influenced student connectivity, student attendance, and academic achievement.

The program evaluation report that resulted from this project study provided insight regarding the program's strengths, weaknesses, efficacy, and influence on student connectivity, attendance, and academic achievement. The report focused on data collection and analyses that supported the recommendations for continued program progress and development.

Rationale

An educational program, once implemented, requires monitoring and evaluation. The Freshman Academy program at the center of this study had been implemented for almost 3 years, data had been collected regarding many aspects of the program; yet, no program evaluation had been conducted. The initial data collected including student absentee rates, student pass and fail rates of core curriculum subjects, student out-of-school suspensions, and student involvement in extracurricular activities showed

promise. In each year, students' daily attendance improved, as did passing rates of core curriculum subjects. Sources of data collection came from school student records software, teacher notes, and monthly reports regarding attendance. However, a formative program evaluation, which would provide greater insight into program strengths and weaknesses, had not yet been conducted. Hence, the school district needed to have a better understanding of what factors may have influenced the program's success and how success would be sustained over time.

A program evaluation provided additional exploration into the program's practices and philosophy and yielded data needed to understand how the Freshman Academy influences student success. Program evaluations are used as a research tool to provide formative or summative data regarding the strengths and weaknesses of an implemented program (Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 1994). In order to perform a formative program evaluation for the Freshman Academy, qualitative data were collected to examine program elements, which demonstrated impact on students. There is a developing body of literature regarding the high school freshmen transition experience, as well as fundamentals of emerging freshmen transition program models. Many behaviorists, psychologists, and educational practitioners agreed that ninth-grade transition was the most significant and impactful transition point in a person's educational career, having the most influence on a student's academic success in high school and beyond. Continued research in this area is ongoing, relevant, and appropriate.

In launching this program evaluation study, I selected three major areas that appeared frequently in the literature as influential to student success. This included student connectivity to school, student attendance, and academic achievement measured by students' passing rates of core curriculum subjects. I mapped out a study that included the collection of qualitative data, as I believed that quantitative, archival data already collected by the school district lacked substantive information regarding how and why the program influenced student success. Qualitative data collected from interviews of consenting Freshman Academy teachers, administrators, and support staff, along with detailed notes from program field observations provided the additional data needed to answer questions regarding the program's positive influence, or lack thereof. The archival and documented artifact data served to provide triangulation of the data in the study.

Review of the Literature

Transition programming is important in many different educational transition points; yet, the ninth-grade transition received the greatest attention. In this second literature review, I was able to concentrate on the areas that were revealed as significant during my program study, data collection, analysis, and program evaluation. Using the Walden Library and resources, ERIC, my school librarian, and Google Scholar, I was able to fine tune my focus on adolescent motivation and self-determination theory, factors influencing students' connection to school, influences in students attending school, support systems for ninth-grade transition, teacher teaming and collaboration, and

relationship building as it affects student achievement. Also, I investigated and discovered a ninth-grade transition website and BlogSpot, "The Freshmen Transition Network" (Habeeb, 2017). Habeeb, who is a forerunner in high school freshmen transition programming, maintains a forum and BlogSpot with hundreds of members who are involved a ninth-grade transition program. The members post, blog, and share ideas, research, and advice regarding improving the freshmen transition experience. My membership has provided me with a casual, informative place to share and discover information about current research in successful ninth-grade transition programs.

Student Motivation, Self-Determination, and Self-Efficacy

There is research on environmental and human influence in adolescent motivation, self-determination, and self-efficacy in academic attainment. However, in studying the ninth-grade transition experience, some factors impact these constructs in adolescents. Particularly, research on adolescents between the ages of 13 to 16 years of age is unique in that this age group experiences a multitude of simultaneous and on-going changes including physiological, emotional, social, and cognitive upheavals.

Deci, Ryan, Bandura, Zimmerman, and Eccles are a few of the theorists who have dedicated their career to research and analysis in the area of adolescent development, self-determination, self-efficacy, and social learning theory. Their contributions in this area of social science made an impact in the understanding of adolescents in the transition process and were supportive in the research findings in this project study and the program evaluation that followed.

Deci and Ryan's work in adolescent self-efficacy and self-determination is accredited as being some of the most scholarly research in the dynamics of adolescent self-perception, decision making, and motivation. The focus has been on intrinsic and extrinsic motivators such as gender, culture, family relationships, school, and peers. These factors were significant in many of the aspects studied to have influence in the Freshman Academy.

Bandura's theoretical studies in social learning and self-efficacy were lauded by many professional colleagues. Zimmerman shared Bandura's fascination with self-efficacy and self-motivation, particularly in children and adolescents. Together they created theories relative to children's motivation and academic achievement based on factors including parent involvement and culture, but also focused on school, teacher, and peer relationships as influential in an adolescent's life.

Eccles (year) explored the relationships between gender and ethnicity, as well as relationship influence. Eccles theorized that peer influence and school transitions were significant in student regulation of their own behavior. Author created the stage-environment fit theory, which suggested that school and social environments that adapted to the changing needs of adolescents would have positive outcomes for those adolescents, as opposed to environments that do not meet the changing needs of that unique age group. According to Gutman and Eccles (2007), "Changes occur as a result of puberty and cognitive development, school transitions, and changing roles with peers and families" (p. 522.)

There is theoretical support for ninth-grade transition programs in accommodating this group of adolescents in their need for social support, relationship building, and advocacy for self-determination. A well-developed Freshman Academy may provide the environment and resources that promote self-efficacy and independent, yet guided thinking. In addition, transition models support parent and community involvement to assist students in their cognitive and educational progress.

Student Connectivity and Relationships

In nearly every researched aspect of the ninth-grade transition experience, the topic of teacher and student relationship building was recognized as influential to student connectivity, regular attendance, and academic achievement. The relationship and trust between a student and their teacher(s) were often the most important factor in student sustainable success (Barry & Reschly, 2012; Black, 2004; Elffers, Oort, & Karsten, 2012; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Jones & Schindler, 2016; Roybal, Thornton, & Usinger, 2014; Waren & Heindel, 2017; Watson & Bogotch, 2016; Willens, 2013). The nurtured relationships and family-like connections between not only teachers and students, but students and their peers, is significant in promoting student success. Positive school climate supported by trusting relationships were credited for the students' emotional well-being (Elffers et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2016), as well as improved daily attendance (Benner & Wang, 2014; McConnell & Kubina, 2014.) Additionally, relationship building among peers, supported by embedded character education, is believed to decrease the growing phenomena of cyber-bullying. According to Bauman, Toomey, and Walker

(year), "school administrators may wish to heed the growing call for a "restorative justice" and other non-punitive, problem-solving approaches for resolving bullying incidents" (p. 349). In the Freshman Academy model, behavior modification, including that of bullying, is handled by promoting student accountability, reflection, and restorative justice.

Equally important in academy relationship building is teacher respect, trust, and camaraderie. Teachers who collaborate, share ideas and build rapport within the academy energize each other and serve as models for the same among the students in the academy. Teachers who pay attention to their professional relationships foster trust and collegiality, thereby increasing their own personal success and job satisfaction (Farnsworth, 2010; Kimmel, 2012). Farnsworth and Kimmel (year) wrote about teacher collaboration as the basis for school reform. It is through collaboration that teachers succeed in linear planning, coordinating, and making sense of how instruction is delivered (Kimmel, 2012). The Freshman Academy is built upon the premise that teacher sharing through common planning time is essential to the program's success.

Community relationship building is a third aspect in the nurturing of relationships that impact school connectivity and attendance. Researchers demonstrated the importance of school climate and how it is impacted by school and family-community partnerships (Lee, Graham, Ratts, & Bailey, 2011). Service learning, which is promoted within the School-family Community Partnerships (SFCs), is an integral part of improving overall school climate; enhancing academic, emotional, and social awareness in students; and

creating powerful connections between school and community. The Freshman Academy embraces SFCs through service learning and community supports including food drives, school and family fun nights, and community projects that are completed through partnerships with local business and charities. These are the venues for students to participate in activities that teach good citizenship and instill the values of philanthropy, community pride, and care.

Climate and Student Engagement

A large body of research regarding ninth-grade transition programs has focused on school climate and how it affects student connectivity and engagement. The Freshman Academy was created under the premise that students are transitioning from a more elementary-school-like environment to one that is more demanding both academically and socially. Student absenteeism and engagement has been directly associated with school climate. To enhance student attendance and achievement, the school climate is a paramount consideration. Some researchers believe that school climate is the chief predictor of overall student achievement (Jones & Shindler, 2016). School climate is influenced by multiple factors that affect the environment for learning, social engagement, and the ability for students to feel respected and safe. The relationship between school climate and student success was explored by the School Culture and School Climate Initiative, a project of the United Way in New Jersey (see Warner & Heindel, 2016). Future teachers attending The College of St. Elizabeth, who partnered with Rutgers University, researched the elements that are associated with positive school

climate, which they believed supported student connectivity and success. Researchers discovered that promoting positive exchanges between and among the students, teaching students to monitor their emotions, building positive relationships with teachers, teaching active listening, and providing students with a safe and respectful environment improved students' overall sense of well-being. According to a survey, students' feeling of belonging and friendship grew by 16% over 3 years (Warner & Heindel, 2016).

Additional research has suggested student engagement is directly linked to school climate. A longitudinal, multidimensional study Wang &Eccles, 2013) identified five important aspects that influence school climate and student engagement. The authors included the promotion of "academic goals and social climate emphasized and fostered by teachers in their implementation of school policies, selection of instructional practices and academic tasks, organization of the classroom environment, and the manner in which they relate to their students" (p. 21). They further indicated that students who receive emotional support from their teachers are engaged in learning that relates to their interests and has real-world meaning, are provided greater opportunities for success. The result is students' increased self-esteem, self-efficacy, and increased student engagement and connection to school. The Freshman Academy embraces and supports these important program elements, which promote a healthy and motivating school climate.

The Impact of Student Connectivity on Attendance and Academic Achievement

The purpose of this study and culminating program evaluation is to identify in what ways teachers of the Freshman Academy may influence student connectivity,

attendance, and academic achievement. The research suggests that many factors are involved. Among the most influential factors were student relationships with teachers and peers, provision for opportunities for student success, academic motivation, socioeconomic and family background, school climate, and student self-determination.

A ninth-grade transition program must address the distinctive needs of a unique group. Numerous aspects of a Freshman Academy should be considered in terms of program efficacy in promoting student success. Three central factors important to the stakeholders and the focus of this study were (a) student connectivity to school, which is (b) believed to affect student attendance, and ultimately, (c) student academic achievement. A review of current literature suggested three factors are interrelated and have reciprocal influence.

Students must feel safe and have a healthy connection to school in order to want to attend. Studies conducted in urban schools indicated safety concerns ranked high in reasons for increased student absenteeism and decreased graduation rates (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Barry & Reschley, 2012; Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2012). Also noted were issues related to teacher apathy and disconnect with students. Students' sense of safety and belonging are critical to their connectivity, which greatly influenced attendance, engagement and academic achievement. Connectivity is reliant upon the interpersonal activities students experience along with the social support they receive from parents, teachers, and friends. Chung-Do et al. (2013) examined the support provided in a 4-year high school course offered to Asian and Pacific-Islander students to

enhance their connectivity to school. The study resulted in students building strong

personal relationships with teachers and peers that added to their school connectivity. The

literature suggests that without a healthy connection to school, a student may become

disengaged, which leads to chronic absenteeism, thus, missing important instruction and

collaboration. This, then, hampers their ability to master the skills required to pass core

curriculum subjects (London, Sanchez, & Castrechini, 2016).

The literature concurs with recent reports that student absence at school is a

national dilemma. Chronic absenteeism is on the rise, and its impact has bearings on

student preparedness for college and career. Attendance at school is be imperative for a

students' social, emotional, and academic well-being (Benner & Wang, 2014). In the high

school transition, student attendance may a downward turn, which further exacerbates

student academic success. An added dilemma is that many schools have reported an

increase in parental/guardian absence excuse notes, suggesting this is a social problem as

well. Further, the amount of increased involuntary absence from factors within the

student's family or conditions of his or her life has risen (Birioukov, 2016). As a result,

there has been an increase in student truancy charges, leading to parental fines or other

imposed interventions. These and other causes for student chronic absenteeism are

responsible for increased negative educational outcomes including greater number of

students failing classes, grade retention, and not graduating on time or dropping out of

school. In a correlational study on student attendance and academic achievement, Rogers

et al. (2016) concluded that school attendance directly correlated with academic

achievement and was a strong predictor of high school graduation. Additionally, the study revealed that chronic tardiness added to this dilemma by adding additional days if not weeks of cumulative class absence. Other similar studies have offered suggestions in combatting chronic absenteeism including that of improving communication with parents and guardians regarding their child's absences and the long-term consequences of missed school time. Teachers can also do their part in reversing chronic absenteeism by distributing a clear attendance policy to students, linking higher grades to class attendance (Snyder & Frank, 2016).

In the Freshman Academy, chronic absenteeism was addressed on many levels. Academy teachers spoke individually with chronically absent students and forged a relationship with them to give students a reason to come to school. Many of these students have hardships in their lives, and an adult advocate can make a difference in the student wanting to come to school each day. Additionally, in the Academy, open and frequent communication with parents is a practice, and attendance awards are given along with character awards at the monthly Freshman Academy assemblies.

The final Freshman Academy component researched as a part of the program evaluation was student academic achievement. This key component, the ultimate goal of a Freshman Academy, is influenced by student connectivity and student attendance. The literature suggests that without student connectivity and improved attendance, academic achievement is not possible. The three components appear to be reciprocal, one enhancing the other.

When students experience academic success, they are empowered by their self-efficacy, which enhances self-determination and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, academic success is not defined the same for every student in the ninth grade. Success is a subjective matter defined differently for every student. For high achievers, or gifted and talented students, academic achievement may be the ability to take honors level courses with a high level of participation and strong grades. For average achievers, it may be taking mostly college preparatory classes and passing them with good or fair grades. However, for the academically challenged, or classified student, academic success may be passing most classes by utilizing IEP or 504 Plan accommodations and taking advantage of resource and in-class support opportunities made available to them. In an efficacious ninth-grade transition program, supports are put in place for transitioning students with special needs. According to Dorman (2012), special needs students require additional supports to achieve academic success. Suggestions included matching these students with a helpful senior student, creating and providing access to a tutorial advisory period, assigning and adult mentor or advisor for at risk students, and making behavior expectations clear with an appropriate process for behavior modification. In addition, beginning a graduation plan with career opportunities as a goal is a proactive suggestion for looking toward the future in a positive manner (Dorman, 2012).

Teachers who are provided information regarding students requiring additional resources are better prepared to meet their differentiated and diversified needs. The

Building Assets Reducing Risks (BARR) model (as discussed in Hinojosa et al., 2016)
was designed to help ninth-graders transition to high school and get on a track to
graduate. Researchers have examined this program for its successful application of eight
interconnected strategies which are purported to enhance teacher/student relationships,
enhance student attendance, engagement and behavioral performance (Hinojosa et al.,
2016). There is a plethora of information available for educators to enhance their
students' engagement, thus, improving academic achievement. Pianta, Hamre, and Allen
(2012) compiled educational research focusing on issues related to enhancing teacher-
student relationships, student motivation, improving the capacity of classroom
interactions, and optimizing student engagement and academic achievement.

A school community's climate and culture will influence how the ninth-grade
transition program will be organized and implemented. Stakeholders must anticipate and
understand the unique needs of their freshmen population and make appropriate decisions
regarding the program's curricula, technology infusion, human resources, special needs
population, character education, service learning opportunities, and other student needs
that will support and challenge all learners.

Project Description

To perform a program evaluation, a researcher must understand important factors
affecting the program's implementation. These factors may include but are not limited to
program location, teacher and support staff selection, curricula delivery, and practices
that support teaching and learning. Information regarding the program's inception, vision,

mission, day-to-day implementation, goals, and current outcomes were needed prior to the commencement of a formative evaluation. These critical facts provide a general description of the program and assist in the conceptualization of the project (Spaulding, 2014).

Early program research provided a conceptual framework for the program evaluation. From my discussions with founding administrators and current staff, I had a clear picture of how the program began and how it had evolved in the previous 4 years. Preliminary research is imperative in the effectiveness of the program evaluation.

In the beginning phase of the Freshman Academy's development, a strategically appropriate geographic location for the Academy was selected within the high school building. Some of the Academy models that the Freshman Academy Committee members visited were located outside of the high school building but on campus. Benner (2011) found that a Freshman Academy is more productive when it is conducted separately from the other high school grades. In contrast, Habeeb (2013) argued freshmen should remain in the same building, even mainstreamed among the other three high school grades. Segregating ninth graders may promote a less intimidating environment and may permit the students to become better acquainted with the rigors of the high school curriculum while becoming more mature in the process (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). This does not have to be done completely independent of the high school building; instead, it may be situated within the high school in a separate wing or area that has some private boundaries for the Freshman Academy. The stakeholders of the Freshman Academy

selected a segregated area within the high school, which they believed would provide the students with a feeling of belonging while reducing the fear of the unknown in a larger building that housed the older students.

Additionally, a team-teaching approach that embraced student "houses" was selected as the model for organizing and teaching the students. The stakeholders believed that this would create a similar intimacy between students and teachers to that, which is experienced in the smaller classrooms in eighth grade, and would facilitate a comfortable transition for ninth graders. According to Ganeson and Ehrich (2009), students worry that they may not have the same contact with their high school teachers as they did in their primary grades. Team teachers can maintain that personalized interaction with students, and team planning time furthers the benefit of teachers communicating daily to get to know students much more intimately.

A selection of teachers who have a long-standing reputation for working well with freshmen students were specifically chosen to be a part of the new Freshman Academy. Houses were organized with four core curricular teachers as the main frame, and special education teachers and aides were added to the houses. The team approach to teaching provides teachers with the ability to collaborate and share information and ideas regarding their common group of students and lends a more personal and individualized approach to teaching this vulnerable age group (Ellerbrock, 2012). Electives including world languages, physical education, music, and art were to remain in the main high

school building. Freshmen would move out of the Academy to attend elective classes, giving them some exposure to the entire high school population and facility.

Behavior modification practices for this distinctive age group would also take on a team approach and be adopted for application in the Freshman Academy. This alternative discipline process was to be implemented by individual team teachers who had gained trust a good rapport with the student. If need be, more challenging discipline issues would be overseen by a dedicated administrator or guidance counselor for the Freshman Academy.

High school subject supervisors worked with the teaching staff to select appropriate freshmen curricula and delivery methods for best practices in 21st-century teaching and learning. Students had been provided one-to-one Chromebooks in eighth grade, which was continued in the ninth grade.

Finally, a character education element, believed to be an integral component in a ninth-grade transition program, was selected, and teachers were trained in the program's delivery. An entire year was dedicated to the research and discussion of how the program would be implemented and a vision and goals were developed to be the guiding force.

Once I had enlightened myself to these important program concepts, I began to consider the development of my project, which would culminate in a program evaluation. The program evaluation examines closely the components of the Academy and addresses the strengths and weaknesses of the program, specifically considering how the program influences student success. A review of current research demonstrated three major areas

of study in student success, particularly in the ninth-grade transition year. They included

student connectivity to school, student attendance, and student academic achievement. In

order to research these three factors, I needed to understand teacher perceptions of how

they influenced students and I needed to observe the program in the field to discern how

the Freshman Academy's culture, environment and practices influenced student

connectivity, attendance and achievement. Finally, documented and archival artifacts

would be investigated and analyzed for triangulation of data.

A timetable for the research related to the program evaluation was estimated to be

approximately 2 months. The process would include interviews of staff participants,

followed by significant observation and study in the field, and finally a review of

documented and archival data. Data collection and analysis was continuously performed

and additional time was needed for final analysis. The objective was to complete the

study in mid-to-late April, right around the school's spring break period. This timeline

was maintained, and the program evaluation report began to materialize in late April.

The objective was to provide the report to the district's stakeholders prior to the end of

the school year for consideration for the upcoming school year.

Project Implications

Potential outcomes from a successful ninth-grade transition program are varied

depending upon the amount of research and investment a school district is willing to

commit to that program. Many freshman transition models must be considered, and each

embraces its own version of components found in best practices for ninth-grade

transition, which has been discussed at great length in this research study. Program evaluation provides valuable data and analysis regarding the program model implemented as well as the practices and resources utilized to conduct the program. Each school district is unique in the students, staff, culture and climate that is in place. Hence, it is important to perform a program evaluation to determine the strengths, weaknesses and potential for improvement with the program.

Local Community

The decision to create and implement a Freshman Academy in this local district went through several stages before it became a reality. A great deal of time, planning, and human and financial resources were expended to make it a reality for the school district. A program evaluation was the likely and appropriate next step in investigating whether the investment was worthwhile, and if attention was needed to maintain the program's positive influence on ninth graders.

Throughout the project study and culminating program evaluation, the leadership of our district, administration of the high school, and staff of the Academy learned much about what has worked in the Academy and what has not. When professional staff engage in scholarly discourse and are open-minded regarding suggestions, research findings, change, and improvement possibilities, growth, and positive progress are achieved. It is when a program becomes stagnant and its stakeholders apathetic that advancement is rendered impossible. Formative evaluation provides "valuable data which is reported back to project staff as the program is taking place" (Spaulding, 2014, p. 9). These data

and this process that enables stakeholders to assess their practices, policies ,and strategies that lend to overall program success.

This project study and program evaluation has been an integral part of the ongoing development and enhancement of the district's Freshman Academy. The data collected and analyzed in this program evaluation served to identify strengths and weaknesses in the program for continued development in meeting the needs of the district freshmen.

Global Community

The research completed in the project study and program evaluation has implications for success on a much wider scale than simply informing one school district. Many aspects of the collected and analyzed data have a global relatability as they address adolescent social, emotional, physical, and educational theoretical frameworks and methodology for successfully working within these constructs. Although ninth graders may exhibit some differences from culture to culture, their developmental needs tend to be similar. Therefore, ninth-grade transition programs may be relevant and influential in a global arena.

Additionally, program evaluation of newly developed freshman transition programs are essential in their progress and effectiveness. A formative program evaluation provides valuable data to the stakeholders regarding program influence and success in meeting specific goals. Teacher interviews, program observations, and archival, documented data are valuable in analyzing critical information related to a

program's potential success or failure. The practice of program evaluation is one that can be globally successful. Additionally, this Freshman Academy program evaluation can be used as an exemplar for others that follow, and the continued evaluation process of other programs to come will add to a body of research and evaluation techniques that will enhance this process for future researchers.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

Ninth-grade transition programs, often found in the form of freshman academies, are considered to be the 21st-century answer to addressing the needs of a vulnerable population of students. In the past decade, model programs have begun to emerge all around the country, and a great deal of current literature has focused on this phenomenon. As a high school administrator, I have a personal interest and motivation in investigating what has, and can, influence student success in ninth grade, and possibly for the remaining years of high school as well. It has been my observation that ninth-grade students have needs that require consideration as they transition into the high school. In this project, I focused on identifying those needs and examining how the Freshman Academy program can attempt to address those needs.

The Freshman Academy model studied was entering its 4th year immediately prior to the study. Therefore, a good amount of data already collected by the school existed and greatly assisted the triangulation of data in this study. However, it was important to have new, fresh data collected by an unbiased researcher. Therefore, in the first 3 years of the academy's implementation, I recused myself from any influence over or supervision of with the academy. I remained uninvolved with the policy creation, teacher coaching, evaluation, or general oversight of the program up to and until I had received IRB approval for the study. This provided me with a clean slate in which to

observe the program's practices and strategies, without any prior beliefs or predisposition regarding the program.

The staff interviews were eye opening, as this was a cohesive group, most of whom have worked together for the entire 4 years of the program's existence. Major themes were identified in this initial data collection. One of the benefits of being an internal auditor is that the staff had known me for 7 years and there already existed a sense of trust between us, which I had cultivated from my first years in the district. As a result of this trust, staff members demonstrated a candid and comfortable relationship with me as the researcher. They permitted me to come into their classrooms; observe their activities, team meetings, planning sessions; and gave me a front row seat to a behind-the-scenes look at the academy. I do not supervise or evaluate these teachers, and so we maintained that status, and teachers were not reluctant to share their thoughts, ideas, successes, and failures with me.

During the collection of data, certain limitations were noted. Data collected by the guidance department was not maintained similarly each year as lead staff changed, and hence, needed to be stream-lined in order to be consistent. In some years, attendance records were maintained and categorized by excused and unexcused groupings. Other years, this was not done, and so, I had to delve deeply into these records to have an accurate reflection of the true increases or decreases in absenteeism. This included getting the assistance of the information technology staff to help recreate accurate annual percentages for student attendance. Similarly, there were years where data were collected

regarding the passing/failing of core curriculum subjects, and times when that was not recorded in as detailed of a fashion. Again, I needed to use other school records through the databases to insure accuracy of the data that represented academic achievement among freshmen students

Finally, a slight limitation involved the survey documents that were prepared and disseminated with the June 2016 Freshman Academy survey. Although the survey was customized to the academy and created by a reputable and certified consultant, the survey was conducted in the last month of the school year, and did not get the numbers of participants that were expected. However, the survey did yield significant data and the consultant provided charts and tables that assisted in understanding teacher and student perceptions of the Freshman Academy. This aligned with the research questions and contributed to the development of the program evaluation.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

Freshman academies are a potential expense that many school districts cannot afford, largely due to their separate and independent nature. It often requires a duplication of services and, in some cases, that is not affordable or available to a school district. Habeeb (2013) suggested that a Freshman Academy program can comfortably coexist within the high school environment, even comingle with the three other high school grades, and still demonstrate success. Habeeb (2013) stated, "Just as there are more tools than hammers, there are multiple types of transition programs. It is a mistake to assume

that a school must have a Freshman Academy to transition freshmen into high school" (p. 21).

In this project study, the transition program being evaluated was a Freshman Academy, which by nature is a separated entity, even if it exists in the larger high school facility. According to Habeeb (2013), there are common elements in both a Freshman Academy and a standard ninth-grade transition program, which if implemented well, will provide the same results. Therefore, for those who have considered an academy for their ninth-grade transition program, but thought they could not be successful because they did not have the separated, dedicated space, an alternative approach would be to have the freshmen mainstreamed into the larger high school environment but implement the essential components that make the transition program effective. Finally, of significant importance is to ensure that freshmen teachers have teams and common planning time for collaboration; that they are encouraged and trained to build strong, trusting relationships with their freshmen students; and that freshmen are recognized for their accomplishments and growth within the high school community. These common factors empower the freshmen to succeed, even when a segregated academy is not in place.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

The high school Freshman Academy has already served as a model for three visiting districts in New Jersey. I talked with some of the visiting stakeholders, and they shared many of the same concerns that we have regarding student connectivity, attendance, and academic achievement as being main reasons for their researching the

academy for their school district. This sharing of information provided a sense of assurance that the Freshman Academy, and this study, would prove to provide positive social change where it is needed. As a scholar practitioner in this study and program evaluation, I believe my sharing of the study will result in the development and sharing of other program studies, providing information for the stakeholders in my school district and in other school districts as well. This may promote 21st-century educational practices to flourish.

In the program evaluation (see Appendix A) resulting from this project study, factors that influenced the program's success and affect student connectivity, attendance, and academic achievement are outlined. Those categories having the greatest influence in the academy included teacher/student and peer relationships; the organizational structure of teams and houses in the academy that provide more student individualized attention; common planning time for academy teachers; and a dedicated administrator and guidance counselor for greater, in-depth program support. Additional integral points of program evaluation included the student character education embedded in the lessons via the Pyramid of Success (Wooden & Carty, 2015), the family and community outreach that impacts the whole child, and the need for sustained district support and leadership for the academy to continue to grow and flourish.

Throughout the study and evaluation process, I observed that many resources are required to provide student sustenance in the ninth-grade transition. The implications discussed herein were the basis of the resulting program evaluation, which provided the

district stakeholders with general and specific information to better understand how the program's implementation affected the program's objectives, goals, and overall vision. The Freshman Academy studied in this project benefitted from this research and evaluability assessment, as could other emerging ninth-grade transition programs.

Educational leadership is experienced in numerous ways. Research and study can provide valuable information regarding successful strategies and practices for improving teaching and learning, exploring new programs and technologies for enhancing learning, or innovative ways to globalize communication and collaboration. As a researcher and practitioner, I found it important to share the process and outcomes of all scholarly research in transition programming because transitions occur in other levels of education as well. This research can provide a baseline for additional study in other transitional points including from elementary to middle school and high school into college. When we share our research with others, we become agents of positive social change.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

The study of how a Freshman Academy influences student connectivity, attendance, and academic achievement is important in a changing educational landscape, as is the scholarly process of program evaluation. Collecting and analyzing data related to emerging programs and driving data-informed decisions can improve the U.S. educational system. Grounded theory in self-determination, motivation, social learning, self-efficacy, and stage-environment fit (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gutman & Eccles, 2007; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992) should guide our decisions in creating

environments where adolescents will not just survive, but thrive. Research and practical experience suggest adolescents are vulnerable in many ways. They are experiencing many physical, social and emotional changes. As a result, they require unique supports to make successful transitions, including going from middle school to high school. Recent research and reports suggest that students are becoming more apathetic to school, chronic absenteeism is a concern, and academic achievement is declining while dropout rates are increasing (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012; Roderick, et al., 2014; Uvaas, et al., 2013). Through teacher interviews, program observations, and field notes, and documented data, these themes were evident. An environment that is safe, welcoming, and supportive of relationship building is critical in students becoming successful. Educators must strive to nurture the developing social awareness and self-efficacy skills that are crucial to healthy adolescent development.

Teachers with experience in ninth-grade education should be recruited and retained for successful ninth-grade transition programs to flourish. These professionals have developed a set of proficiencies that best addresses the complex needs of ninth graders. Many of the Academy teachers observed in this project study had previous experience as a ninth-grade teacher. They used practices to connect with students and stay connected, even when the student resisted. They productively reached out to their students in a way that influenced them both socially and academically, leaving students feeling validated and important.

Another valuable component of this study was the thorough analysis of the

teacher and student perception survey conducted at the end of the 2015-16 school year.

Student perceptions revealed in the 2016 survey confirmed that they feel comfortable and

safe in the Academy. This likely had an influence on student attendance and, thus,

academic achievement. When students are present in school, they miss less work and can

master the skills necessary to pass their core curriculum classes.

Character education, restorative discipline, and academic modifications were also

influential components unveiled in this project study. Today's adolescents often are

bombarded with negative messages from the media, music, and video games. Parenting

styles and responsibilities have also shifted in the last decade, and many parents are not

as engaged in teaching their children important social values as they have in the last 2

decades. The character education embedded in transition programs such as the Freshman

Academy provides important lessons in informed decision making and being a

responsible citizen. These are critical to the development of responsibility and ethical

behavior that will assist students in becoming successful adults. Students are more likely

to experience success when they have adults encouraging them to look at choices and

outcomes for their lives.

The study of ninth-grade transition programs touched upon many important

aspects of adolescent development and the need for appropriate programming to meet the

unique needs of this transitional phase in a young person's life. The research embraced

the need to support the whole child, which includes consideration of their socioeconomic

status, family make-up, and special needs. This philosophy was significant in discovering the components in attaining a successful transition program that reaches all children.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Several implications should be considered from this project study and how educators can apply new knowledge to future study and decision making. First, the research demonstrated that ninth-grade transition programs can be a best practice in meeting the needs of this vulnerable adolescent age group. Ninth graders are arguably the most vulnerable age group, experiencing significant changes and challenges in their lives. Recent disruptions resulting from technological advancements, changes in communication, social media, and a world in constant fear of terrorism have led to a new dynamic in how adolescents live their lives. The data analysis showed that ninth-grade adolescents live in a much more uncertain world than in years past. As a result, transition programs are needed to provide additional safety nets and strategies for learning to take place. The components discovered for best practices in a transition program were outlined and discussed herein, and should serve as a basis for continued exploration and study.

To effectively apply influential ninth-grade transition program practices, I believe that there are supplementary variables in the lives of current ninth graders that must be considered. First, the advent of the cellphone, particularly the iPhone in 2007, changed the face of U.S. education and communication. Today's ninth graders were born in 2001 and 2002, and hence were the first kindergartners to go to school with iPhones already

embedded in our society. As influential as the iPhone may be in our increased communication and other technological uses, the iPhone was also reason for great social and academic disruption in the lives of current high school students. iPhones were not just a tool for communication but placed the Internet and World Wide Web into the palm of young, often inexperienced hands.

Additionally, the 2016-17 freshman class was born near the time of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. I believe that this may play a significant role in the way this group of children see the world and the fragility of life. It is my belief that this too may play a role in the way these adolescents interact with each other, and what value they place on education in a seemingly insecure, terror-ridden world.

In considering future research, I suggest that there is valuable research regarding the effects of the iPhone introduction and the September 11 bombings on adolescent students who have lived with these two influential variables their entire lives. During the project study and data collection, it occurred to me through general conversation and observation of our freshmen that this could be an important study that may add new dimension to how the high school population thinks, learns, and copes with the world around them.

Conclusion

Although many factors play a role in the implementation of a successful ninth-grade transition program, connectivity, attendance, and achievement appear to be the

most important in influencing a student's trajectory in high school and beyond. Significantly important is the manner in which relationships are developed, instruction is delivered and supported, how self-esteem and self-efficacy is promoted, and what safety nets are in place for students who were at risk. Once these major and minor components are identified, researched, and applied, a Freshman Academy or ninth-grade transition program can be implemented and may have great influence in students' quality of life and learning potential for future success.

Program evaluation collects and analyzes critical data to assure that a program's goals and mission are being realized fully. This research resulted in a report that will heighten stakeholder knowledge and improve the Freshman Academy program. Based on this project study and program evaluation, many minor and subthemes warranted additional study. These included issues related to the new family unit in society, including single parent families, reconstituted families, same sex parent families, and grandparents raising grandchildren. Also noted were the number of families that are considered middle class yet have family incomes at or below the poverty line. Thus, many students come to school hungry and inadequately nourished. In addition, substance abuse and mental illness within the family unit seemed to grow each year. These and other social issues appeared to be critical to the students' level of commitment to school and academic success they could attain.

Finally, the study of ninth-grade transition programs and a Freshman Academy illuminated how public and private education has changed in recent years. To meet the

needs of a rapidly changing society, we must remain alert to the needs of its people and focus on the skills and jobs that will be in place as we move forward in the 21st-century. In doing this, educators continue to provide tomorrow's children, our nation's future, with the promise of productive and satisfying lives.

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Appendix A: Program Evaluation Report of Findings for Local Stakeholder Use

The Freshman Academy's Influence on Student Connectivity, Attendance and Academic

Achievement

Formative Evaluation Report for Local Stakeholder Use

The Vernon Township High School Freshman Academy's Influence on Student

Connectivity, Attendance, and Academic Success

by

Nancy O. LoPresti, Ed.D

Report Submitted to the VTSD Board of Education

Summer 2017

Program Evaluation Introduction

A formative evaluation plan was developed during the course of the doctoral program study of the VTHS Freshman Academy. The study of the Freshman Academy provided great insight into common practices in freshmen transition programs, and further, the researcher explored potential best practices in the implementation of an educational program that addresses the unique needs of ninth grade adolescents. Understanding how a ninth-grade transition program may meet the needs of students is the first step in preparing to evaluate the program to examine the processes and outcomes of such a program. This evaluation would focus on the program's strengths and weaknesses to provide valuable data for program improvement and development.

An evaluability assessment is conducted through interviews, observations, and review of documented archival and artifact data. For this study, a formative evaluation would provide information regarding the Academy's effectiveness in reaching the stated objectives (Patton, 2015). This evaluation would also examine closely fluctuations in the data that may indicate areas where the program lacks consistency, needing more attention. The objective of the program evaluation is to go beyond understanding how it may work, to why it may work and what can be done to make it work more effectively in reaching its goals.

After becoming more familiar with the Freshman Academy's history, organizational structure and goals I completed a thorough and exhaustive literature

review, focusing on the components that appeared to be most influential in the program's delivery. The research suggested that student connectivity to school affected student attendance, and student attendance affected student academic achievement, In order to research these three influential components of the Freshman Academy, an evaluation plan was created which included conducting teacher interviews, program observations and reviewing archival, documented records to examine the influence they may have in the Academy. An evaluation matrix was developed next and included three phases of research to collect data for the formative program evaluation to take place. This matrix was used as the blueprint to outline the evaluation process and procedures (Spaulding, 2014, p.78). Additionally, it aligned with evaluation objectives, which were outlined by stakeholders' interests.

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

I developed three phases as the methodology in conducting the Freshman Academy program evaluation. They were outlined in the evaluation matrix as follows:

1. Phase one focused on interviews of Freshman Academy Teachers, Administrators and a dedicated Guidance Counselor. Interview questions were created for each participant group and a semi-formal interview process guided the collection of this data. All interviews were audiotaped and sent for professional transcription. Member-checking was permitted and minor and major themes were color coded and organized in a data matrix.

2. Phase two focused on Freshman Academy field observations in order to collect rich, detailed notes regarding teacher interactions with students and one another within the Academy. Specific attention was given to interactions that influenced student connectivity to school and a sense of belonging. Also, factors which may influence student attendance and academic success were a focal point as well. All field notes were analyzed, color coded for minor and major themes, and placed in the data matrix. A private journal was kept and analyzed that included researcher reflections an added depth to the field note data.

3. Phase three included the collection of artifact and documented data for triangulation of data in the project study. Archival data included a survey conducted by the school focusing on Freshman Academy experiences and perceptions, as well as quantitative data collected by the school regarding freshmen student attendance and percentages of students passing or failing core curriculum subjects over a period of three and one half years. Additionally, study participants offered other documented artifact data including lesson plans, program activities, awards, collaborations, team meetings, behavior modification strategies and character education tools.

Once the three phases of the program evaluation were complete, a thorough review of the analyzed, collected data were closely examined. Major and minor themes addressing Academy strengths and weaknesses emerged, as well as some related sub-

themes. The formative evaluation assessment performed focused on the programs'

influence on student connectivity, school attendance and resulting academic achievement,

which were major themes in the research and program evaluation. Two of the main

supporting themes that were underlying to these included teacher-student and peer to

peer relationship building and the organizational structure of the program model which is

teacher teams in houses that provide extensive sharing and collaboration for common

students. Common planning time further enhanced this structure as teachers have

dedicated time to share ideas, meet with students and parents, and utilize common

resources. A dedicated administrator and guidance counselor was found to be crucial and

this theme was confirmed in many staff interviews and program observations where

administrative and guidance involvement added an extra layer of intervention and support

for students in need. Another common theme was that of student recognition, behavior

modification through reflection and restorative discipline levels, and a character

education component to guide the entire process. Finally, a theme which supported

family and community outreach was found commonly in interview, observation and

artifact data. Program sustainability is considered to be dependent on these major and

minor themes which support a healthy ninth-grade transition program and were evident in

the Freshman Academy studied.

A formative evaluation is "a type of evaluation whereby data collection and

reporting are focused on the now, providing ongoing, regular feedback to those in charge

of delivering the program" (Spaulding, 2014, p.4). Hence, this program evaluation report

contains a purpose for the program evaluation, methodology used, and the findings, including limitations and suggestions for continued evaluation.

Freshman Academy Program Evaluation

Findings

Relationships

Perhaps the most significant implication of a successful ninth-grade transition program is the relationship between and among teacher, staff and students. The Freshman Academy has created small, intimate learning communities by developing three houses and teams of teachers dedicated to that "house" of students. A true sense of caring and nurturing was observed in the Academy and students were given many opportunities to build strong relationships with teachers and peers. Fun activities including award assemblies, school scavenger hunts, and a year-end "Froshapalooza" which entails a full day of outside field competition and a barbeque played a part in relationship building. In addition, teachers demonstrated interest in their students' lives in and out of school, and often provided one-to-one time with a student in need. These and related strategies were successful in building strong relationships and community rapport, as well as enhancing student connectivity to school.

The Organizational Structure: Teams and Houses

Three houses of teachers and students who identify themselves by the three school colors were the organizational structure for the Freshman Academy. In each house, a team of core curriculum subject teachers; math, science, language arts and social studies, make up the nuclear teaching team, and meet weekly for common planning/team meetings. Special education teachers, in-class support aides and world language teachers are an extended part of the team. All other classes in elective courses such as creative and performing arts, music, physical education, health, and business are conducted outside of the Academy facility. However, those who teach elective courses to freshmen are welcomed to attend Freshman Academy team meetings whenever they choose. A majority of teachers indicated that they felt supported by provided meeting time and common planning time, and that this permitted collaboration, sharing of materials and academic consistency for the students.

Freshmen spend most of their nine period day within the Academy location and move into the larger high school facility for the elective classes. This allows students to experience the full high school environment in a manner that will assist their transition gradually into their sophomore year. Current literature supports this as being a best practice for ninth-grade transition.

Common Planning Time

Common planning time is lauded by the Academy teachers as a critical component to their success. Academy team teachers are provided a common planning period every day. During this period, teachers spend time discussing their students' needs, share strategies in teaching and learning and provide support for one another. Additionally, the three houses meet together to maintain open communication and consistency among houses. During common planning sessions, teachers discuss curriculum, teaching strategies, special education modifications, assessment strategies, projects, class management, and technology infusion. In addition, teachers take advantage of this team time to discuss their common students' needs, and possible family or social issues that may have affected a student's performance or overall well-being. At times, a student who is having problems socially or academically is brought into the team meeting to provide that student with individualized assistance from the team. The dedicated guidance counselor, administrator or school social worker also may attend the meeting to provide additional support for the student. In this manner, team meetings may provide a supportive forum for teachers and students alike, and if necessary, may include a follow-up meeting where the parents or guardians are invited to attend. Dedicated meeting time is critical to the processes involved in teacher support and student intervention.

Dedicated Administrators and Guidance Counselors

The Freshman Academy has the privilege of a dedicated guidance counselor and two dedicated administrators. In the first three years of the Academy's implementation, two dedicated guidance counselors were provided. However, the last two freshmen classes demonstrated declining enrollment, which is not uncommon in many rural New Jersey school districts. As a result, the 2016-17 Freshman Academy reduced their dedicated guidance counselors from two to one guidance counselor. During the program study, it was clear that the sole guidance counselor who was quite diligent and capable, still struggled with meeting the multitude of needs of the 236 students. The program administrators have made some changes in their own responsibilities to assist the guidance counselor in student scheduling issues, parent meetings and behavior modification. Additionally, in the 2016-17 school year, one of the two dedicated administrators was promoted and another district supervisory staff member replaced him as the lead Academy administrator. This supervisor, who is not permanently located in the high school, did not have the same level of exposure to or knowledge of the program as did his predecessor. A majority of Freshman Academy teachers believed that this yielded a reduced investment by administrative personnel, and did have a negative impact on the program's overall success in this fourth year of implementation.

Student Recognition and Character Education

Two important components in the Freshman Academy's ability to positively influence students are the activities that recognize students and the character education

which is promoted in classrooms via the implementation of the Pyramid of Success

(Wooden & Carty, 2015). The Pyramid of Success lessons are based on positive

character attributes and good citizenship. Throughout the year, students are recognized

for a variety of accomplishments and displayed behaviors related to these character

lessons, as well as acts of good citizenship. Awards were given for student honesty,

integrity, perseverance, cooperation initiative and friendship to name a few. Also

recognized were categories such as student demonstration of non-bystander behavior,

improved attendance and academic success, athletic or musical talent and community

service. Students who are empowered by this recognition were not always the best-

behaved, high achievers. Unlikely students were recognized for their progress and

improvements as well. In many ways, the Freshman Academy became a place where the

unrecognized were recognized, and as such, a conduit to steer the students' moral

compass, providing them with new ways to see their future selves. This also made great

strides in improving student connectivity to school, which ultimately improved student

attendance at school as well. Improved attendance often leads to improved academic

achievement as students are present for learning and progressing.

Family and Community Support

The Freshman Academy transition program embraces the entire family, not just

the student. The stakeholders believe that it truly takes a village to raise a child.

Observations of the Academy's activities in the community, charitable fund raising,

support for a student who is ill or in need, talent shows and other activities that extended

out of the Academy and into the community are an important part of students'

connectivity to their school. Also, when parents and community leaders have a voice,

there is a greater investment in the program's success.

District Leadership and Program Sustainability

Finally, in order for a transition program to survive, district leadership must

continue to support the program. This includes financial and human resource support, as

well as pedagogical and scholastic support. Changes in central office administration and

one Freshman Academy administrator appeared to have some negative impact on the

Academy. New leadership often brings new investments and initiatives to a school

district. There is concern among the Academy staff that there may not be the same level

of Central Office support for the Academy, and therefore, the program's sustainability is

in question. The newest lead administrative initiatives have included an extensive Career

and Technology Education program and the district is undergoing a complete grade and

facility reconfiguration. There is some concern that these issues may over-shadow the

Freshman Academy's three-year success, and support of the program may wane. These

are important issues to be further addressed and discussed by the district's stakeholders.

Analyzed Data and Survey Results

Freshman Academy administrators and guidance staff began collecting data in the pilot year, (2013-14) of the Freshman Academy, and have continued to do so through the school year 2016-17.   For the purpose of this project study and program evaluation, archival data was reviewed and analyzed for three and one half years, beginning with the first Freshman Academy class of 2013-14, into the 2016-17 school year, through March 2017, when the study completed in order to analyze the data for program evaluation. Categories of collected data in Table 1 included number of freshmen in each class year, average daily class attendance (notes students attending class and not cutting class), total days of absence as a freshman class (notes connectivity), number of freshmen receiving suspension (notes connectivity and restorative discipline), number of freshmen receiving detentions (notes connectivity and restorative discipline), and total number of freshman course failures, which included students who may have one or more failed core curriculum courses for the year (notes academic achievement). The data were collected each year and compared to the previous year to measure Academy influence.

Table 1. VTHS Freshman Academy archival data 2012-2017

Frosh Class by Freshman Academy Year	Total Number of Frosh Students in September of Frosh Year	Average Daily Class Attendance	Total Days of Absence as Frosh Class	Number of Frosh Suspended (Admin. Induced Absence)	Number of Frosh receiving Detention (Connectivity)	Number of Frosh Failing Core Courses for the year
*2012-13	282	92.47	2338	14	152	101
2013-14	276	95.34	1899	3	85	98
2014-15	237	95.37	1874	4	49	66
2015-16	256	94.89	1769	6	42	67
2016-17	236	91.05	1430	10	51	53

*denotes last Frosh class before Freshman Academy implementation

Note. Retrieved from VTHS Powerschool records, 2013,2014, 2015, 2016, 2017,

In the pilot year of the Freshman Academy, significant improvement was noted in comparison to the final year for freshmen before the Academy was implemented (2012-13). Daily class attendance was increased, and decreased were student absences, suspensions and detentions. There was a slight decrease in the total number of freshmen failing core curriculum courses for the year.

The second year of the Freshman Academy (2014-15) demonstrated continued positive results in these categories. There was another slight increase in daily class attendance, with continued decreases in student absences and student detentions, which were nearly half of that in the previous year. Also decreased were the total number of core curriculum course failures for the year. Interestingly, suspensions rose from 3 to 4, which was still significantly below the 14 suspensions from the 2012-13 non-academy year.

In the third year of the Academy's implementation (2015-16), the data showed some slight, but insignificant change in comparison to the second year of the Academy (2014-15). It appeared as if gains were beginning to plateau after the three-year mark. Daily class attendance dipped slightly, absenteeism improved slightly, yet detentions and suspensions increased by a small margin. In this year, administrators began to pay closer attention to the detention and suspension numbers, as they were the only negative statistics associated with student behavior and restorative discipline.

In the 2016-17 school year, data was collected from the first day of school in September 2016 through March 30, 2017. The results were not what administrators had hoped, and began to show a trend of increasing detentions, suspensions, and failed core curriculum courses. These numbers, representing only two thirds of a school year, were already showing a trend of a reversal of gains that the Academy had made over the first three years. When asked why this may have occurred, administration, Academy staff, and the dedicated guidance counselor stated that they believed there were a number of specific factors that may be responsible for this trajectory. One significant variable is that the number of classified students was higher in this freshmen class (2016-17) in comparison to the previous three freshmen classes. Also noted were the increased number of students in this freshman class diagnosed with ADD, ADHD, anxiety, personality disorder, bipolar disorder, and Asperger's Syndrome. Guidance counselors and Child Study Team members had stated to Academy teachers that district school records indicated this class had traditionally required a much higher level of emotional

and therapeutic support, and teachers believed that additional resources should have been planned in advance to accommodate this group of incoming freshmen. In-house clinicians in the high school-based program, "Effective School Solutions," which had been in place and successful at the high school for three years agreed that the larger number of students in need of a therapeutic environment was somewhat overwhelming in the 2016-17 freshman class, and an additional clinician would have met needs more thoroughly.

Additionally, many of the staff indicated that the recent change in Freshman Academy leadership may be cause for some decreased success. The original dedicated Academy administrator was also the Director of Guidance in 2015-16, maintained an office located in the high school, and was visible each day at the Academy. The 2016-17 Academy administrator did not have a permanent office in the high school, and hence, was not visible daily in the Academy. This reduced administrative investment is believed to have negatively impacted the program's success.

Finally, the Freshman Academy survey conducted in June 2016 provided a positive view of teacher and student perceptions of the program. Survey results which offered insight in teachers' and students' perceptions of the Academy were generally favorable in terms of school climate and safety, academic support, relationships, school connectedness, youth development, non-academic opportunities, and a family/community engagement. It appears that the program meets many of the needs of the ninth-grade transitioning student, yet further exploration in additional support resources may be

appropriate in improving the program for the special needs population. Additionally, reconsideration for a dedicated administrator who is housed in the Academy building should be given as the administrator's daily investment and visibility made a positive impact on the program.

References

Patton, M. Q. (2015). Qualitative research and evaluation methods (4th ed.). Los
    Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Spaulding, D. T. (2014). Program evaluation in practice: Core concepts and examples
    for discussion and analysis. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Appendix B: Letter of Support for the Freshman Academy Program Evaluation

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT
for Curriculum and Instruction

August 23, 2016

To the Chairperson of Mrs. LoPresti's Project Study and Program Evaluation,

 Mrs. LoPresti is currently in the final stages of writing a Project Study and Program Evaluation as her capstone project for Walden University whose focus is the evaluation of The Freshman Academy of VTHS. In respects to the dissertation's value to the school district the findings, once created, will be reported out to the faculty, and the Board of Education and used to promote social or cultural change in our high school. If the results are favorable they will be used to set up paradigms in other grade levels of the school district and shared with other districts who are interested in her findings.

Our district is interested in an evaluation of the academy that will center primarily on the promotion of student connectivity to school, the ancillary advantage of creating improved school attendance, which leads, hopefully, to the tertiary benefit of an increased amount of students passing core curriculum subjects. These three interdependent objectives if observed need to be measured for their durability in the ensuing grades.

Mrs. LoPresti will be required to publish her data with the Board of Education upon the completion of her project including analyzing and disseminating the information gleaned from the survey of students and faculty which she may use while evaluating the program. The survey was approved by the Board of Education this past spring. There is significant interest in whether the students are cognizant of the value of the Freshman Academy and how that relates to their attendance.

It is our hope that this letter will acknowledge not only Mrs. LoPresti's planned project study for this district but also the importance of her reporting out the research, data and findings from her study to the district most directly affected by this program at the conclusion of her study.

Appendix C: Letter of Agreement to Use Student Data

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT
for Curriculum and Instruction

To: Mrs. Nancy LoPresti

Re: Archival Documentation

Per our conversation, please be advised that the VTSD Board of Education
Administration has granted you permission to access, analyze and utilize archival data
and documentation for the purpose of your doctoral project study which will result in a
program evaluation of our high school Freshman Academy. This documentation will
include, but not be limited to Freshman Academy student attendance data, pass/fail
percentages of core curriculum subjects, behavior referrals, student awards and incentive
information, and student/teacher survey results.

As an important note and in order to meet the requirements of confidentiality and
participant protection, be advised that **student and teacher names are not included** in
any of the aforementioned archival data or documentation that has been collected on our
Freshman Academy. We expect that you will maintain this level of anonymity in your
research and resulting program evaluation/Capstone Project for Walden University. We
also expect a full report, once completed, to the Board of Education at a public meeting.
We are pleased that you have selected our Freshman Academy as the focus of your
doctoral research and the resulting program evaluation will surely provide valuable
insight regarding the program's success and areas in need of improvement. Thank you
for your work and your anticipated professionalism in the use of this documentation.

Appendix D: Interview Questions for Freshman Academy Teachers, Guidance

Counselors and Administrators

Interview questions have been developed for the three separate categories of Freshman Academy professionals: Teachers, administrators and guidance counselors will be offered an opportunity to be interviewed on a volunteer basis. Interviews are completely voluntary and are scheduled at a mutually convenient time and date within the first two weeks of the study. All interviews will be held in the high school which houses the Freshman Academy in a neutral office for participants' comfort, and will be audio-taped with the participant's knowledge, and transcribed for accuracy. Participants and their answers will be kept confidential and information shared will be the result of common minor and major themes which emerge from the interview process.

The following three separate groupings of interview questions are established for Freshman Academy teachers, guidance counselors and administrators. The interview questions are aligned with the project study research questions related to professional staff's perceptions on how the Freshman Academy has impacted students in general, and also specifically related to student connectivity, attendance, and achievement. Interviews will be conducted in a semistructured manner, utilizing the questions as the lead off to further exploration and embellishment of answers and ideas.

Teachers' Interview Guide Questions
1. Describe your experience as a Freshman Academy teacher.
    1a. How many years have you taught freshmen in a traditional setting?
    1b. How many years have you taught in a Freshman Academy setting?
2. If you have taught in both a traditional and Academy setting, describe the differences you experienced in both.
    2a. Climate a cultural differences?
    2b. Teaching and practical differences?

3. What are the benefits, if any, of teaming both to teachers and students?

4. How do you receive support in being an effective teacher in the Academy?

   4a. Administrative support?

   4b. Guidance counselor support?

   4c. Colleague support?

   4d. Parental support?

   4e. Other sources of support?

5. What do you think affects a student's connectivity to school?

6. What interventions are in place in the Academy to help reduce chronic absenteeism?

7. What supports are in place in the Freshman Academy to enhance academic achievement?

8. How is the disciplining process different in the Freshman Academy?

9. What interventions are in place to prevent student failure of core curriculum subjects in the Academy?

10. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Academy?

    10a. How would you strengthen the weaknesses?

Guidance Counselors' Interview Guide Questions

1. Describe your experience as a Freshman Academy guidance counselor.

   1a. How many years have you been a freshmen guidance counselor?

   1b. How many years have you been a guidance counselor in a Freshman Academy setting?

2. If you have been a guidance counselor for other grades, describe any unique issues that face a freshmen guidance counselor.

3. Describe the role you play in the teacher team?

   3a. What is your sphere of influence?

   3b. What specific responsibilities do you have to the team and to the student?

4. How do you receive support in being an effective guidance counselor in the Academy?

   4a. Administrative support?

   4b. Teacher counselor support?

   4c. Colleague support?

   4d. Parental support?

   4e. Other sources of support?

5. What do you think affects a student's connectivity to school?

6. What interventions are in place in the Academy to help reduce chronic absenteeism?

7. What supports are in place in the Freshman Academy to enhance academic achievement?

8. How is the disciplining process different in the Freshman Academy?

9. What interventions are in place to prevent student failure of core curriculum subjects in the Academy?

10. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Academy?

    10a. How would you strengthen the weaknesses?

Administrators' Interview Guide Questions

1. Describe your experience as a Freshman Academy administrator.

   1a. How many years have you been an administrator in a traditional setting?

   1b. How many years have you been an administrator of a Freshman Academy?

2. What do you see as some of the major differences of a traditional and academy ninth-grade transition experience?

   2a. Climate a cultural differences?

   2b. Administrative and practical differences?

3. Describe the role you play in supporting the teacher teaming model?

4. How do you provide support to all of the stakeholders in the Academy?

   4a. Teacher support?

4b. Guidance counselor support?

4c. Student support?

4d. Parental support?

4e. Others?

5. What do you think affects a student's connectivity to school?

6. What interventions are in place in the Academy to help reduce chronic absenteeism?

7. What supports are in place in the Freshman Academy to enhance academic achievement?

8. How is the disciplining process different in the Freshman Academy?

9. What interventions are in place to prevent student failure of core curriculum subjects in the Academy?

10. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Academy?

10a. How would you strengthen the weaknesses?

Appendix E: Observation Protocol

Framework for scheduling, organizing and conducting field observations in the Freshman Academy

Purpose: To collect qualitative data related to the Freshman Academy in observing teaching, learning, student/teacher interaction, and the components that make the Academy a unique ninth-grade transition program

1. **Tentative observational settings:** Classrooms, resource classrooms, hallways, labs, team meetings, student and parent meetings, assemblies/auditorium, gymnasium, field trips, in school-specialty activities, and community project activities settings.

2. **Protocol for scheduling formal and informal observations:** All formal observations will be previously approved by the Academy Director or High School Principal, and also, announced and teacher acknowledged. Informal/walk through observations will be brief and as non-intrusive as possible. It is the goal of the researcher to gather qualitative data in its most natural setting. As a means of member checking, Academy teachers interested in communicating further after any formal or informal observation will be provided the opportunity to do so. Observations of the Academy are solely for purpose of gathering qualitative, observational data relative to the program's progress, and not for personal staff evaluation purposes,

3. **Academy teacher, guidance counselor and administrator rights and expectations:**

   a. All observational notes will be kept in the strictest of confidence and will not mention individual's names, rather subject matter.

b. Open communication will be maintained for all observed parties regarding any questions or comments participants in the Academy may have before, during or after a formal or informal observation.

c. Student or staff meetings of a private or sensitive nature will be considered for exclusion of an observance.

Appendix F: Vernon Township Freshman Academy Archival Data

Frosh Class by Freshman Academy Year	Total Number of Frosh Students in September of Frosh Year	Average Daily Class Attendance	Total Days of Absence as Frosh Class	Number of Frosh Suspended (Admin. Induced Absence)	Number of Frosh receiving Detention (Connectivity)	Number of Frosh Failing Core Courses for the year
*2012-13	282	92.47	2338	14	152	101
2013-14	276	95.34	1899	3	85	98
2014-15	237	95.37	1874	4	49	66
2015-16	256	94.89	1769	6	42	67
2016-17	236	91.05	1430	10	51	53

*denotes last Frosh Class before *Freshman Academy* implementation.

Reference:

Vernon Township School District (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017) *Freshman Academy*.

Retrieved from VTSD Powerschool records.

Appendix G: Rev.com Transcription Contract

CLIENT NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT This CLIENT NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT, effective as of the date last set forth below (this "Agreement"), between the undersigned actual or potential client ("Client") and Rev.com, Inc. ("Rev.com") is made to confirm the understanding and agreement of the parties hereto with respect to certain proprietary information being provided to Rev.com for the purpose of performing translation, transcription and other document related services (the "Rev.com Services"). In consideration for the mutual agreements contained herein and the other provisions of this Agreement, the parties hereto agree as follows:

1.   Scope of Confidential Information

1.1. "Confidential Information" means, subject to the exceptions set forth in Section 1.2 hereof, any documents, video files or other related media or text supplied by Client to Rev.com for the purpose of performing the Rev.com Services.

1.2. Confidential Information does not include information that: (i) was available to Rev.com prior to disclosure of such information by Client and free of any confidentiality obligation in favor of Client known to Rev.com at the time of disclosure; (ii) is made available to Rev.com from a third party not known by Rev.com at the time of such availability to be subject to a confidentiality obligation in favor of Client; (iii) is made available to third parties by Client without restriction on the disclosure of such information; (iv) is or becomes available to the public other than as a result of disclosure by Rev.com prohibited by this Agreement; or (v) is developed independently by Rev.com or Rev.com's directors, officers, members, partners, employees, consultants, contractors, agents, representatives or affiliated entities (collectively, "Associated Persons").

2.   Use and Disclosure of Confidential Information

2.1. Rev.com will keep secret and will not disclose to anyone any of the Confidential Information, other than furnishing the Confidential Information to Associated Persons;

provided that such Associated Persons are bound by agreements respecting confidential information. Rev.com will not use any of the Confidential Information for any purpose other than performing the Rev.com Services on Client's behalf. Rev.com will use reasonable care and adequate measures to protect the security of the Confidential Information and to attempt to prevent any Confidential Information from being disclosed or otherwise made available to unauthorized persons or used in violation of the foregoing.

2.2. Notwithstanding anything to the contrary herein, Rev.com is free to make, and this Agreement does not restrict, disclosure of any Confidential Information in a judicial, legislative or administrative investigation or proceeding or to a government or other regulatory agency; provided that, if permitted by law, Rev.com provides to Client prior notice of the intended disclosure and permits Client to intervene therein to protect its interests in the Confidential Information, and cooperate and assist Client in seeking to obtain such protection.

3. Certain Rights and Limitations

3.1. All Confidential Information will remain the property of Client.

3.2. This Agreement imposes no obligations on either party to purchase, sell, license, transfer or otherwise transact in any products, services or technology.

4. Termination

4.1. Upon Client's written request, Rev.com agrees to use good faith efforts to return promptly to Client any Confidential Information that is in writing and in the possession of Rev.com and to certify the return or destruction of all Confidential Information; provided that Rev.com may retain a summary description of Confidential Information for archival purposes.

4.2. The rights and obligations of the parties hereto contained in Sections 2 (Use and Disclosure of Confidential Information) (subject to Section 2.1), 3 (Certain Rights and Limitations), 4 (Termination), and 5 (Miscellaneous) will survive the return of any tangible embodiments of Confidential Information and any termination of this Agreement.

5. Miscellaneous

Page 1

5.1. Client and Rev.com are independent contractors and will so represent themselves in all regards. Nothing in this Agreement will be construed to make either party the agent or legal representative of the other or to make the parties partners or joint venturers, and neither party may bind the other in any way. This Agreement will be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of the State of California governing such agreements, without regard to conflicts-of-law principles. The sole and exclusive jurisdiction and venue for any litigation arising out of this Agreement shall be an appropriate federal or state court located in the State of California, and the parties agree not to raise, and waive, any objections or defenses based upon venue or forum non conveniens. This Agreement (together with any agreement for the Rev.com Services) contains the complete and exclusive agreement of the parties with respect to the subject matter hereof and supersedes all prior agreements and understandings with respect thereto, whether written or oral, express or implied. If any provision of this Agreement is held invalid, illegal or unenforceable by a court of competent jurisdiction, such will not affect any other provision of this Agreement, which will remain in full force and effect. No amendment or alteration of the terms of this Agreement will be effective unless made in writing and executed by both parties hereto. A failure or delay in exercising any right in respect to this Agreement will not be presumed to operate as a waiver, and a single or partial exercise of any right will not be presumed to preclude any subsequent or further exercise of that right or the exercise of any other right. Any modification or waiver of any provision of this Agreement will not be effective unless made in writing. Any such waiver will be effective only in the specific instance and for the purpose given.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties have caused this Agreement to be executed below by their duly authorized signatories.

CLIENT   REV.COM, INC.

Print Name:

By:

Name: Cheryl Brown

Appendix H: The Ohio State University CAYCI Permission to Use Survey Documents

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Social Work

Department/Center/Institute/Program Line One

Stillman Hall
1947 College Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1162

614-123-4567 Phone
614-123-4567 Fax
name.#@osu.edu Email

csw.osu.edu

May 5, 2017

Dear Nancy:

This document serves as permission from the Community and Youth Collaborative Institute (CAYCI) to use the CAYCI survey results and charts and tables, which have previously been collected and created, for your dissertation with appropriate citation.

If you have further questions please contact us via phone (614-292-8596) or email (Anderson-butcher.1@osu.edu).

Sincerely,

Dawn Anderson Butcher, PhD, LISW-S

Appendix I: The Ohio State Vths Freshman Academy Teacher/Staff Survey Results

TEACHER/STAFF CAYCI-SES CONSTRUCTS	
Scale	The degree to which teachers & staff…
Academic Learning Pathway	
Academic Motivation	…Perceive that their students are interested and engaged in school.
Academic Press	…Perceive a normative emphasis on academic success and conformity to specific standards of achievement across their school community.
Career and College Readiness	…Perceive that students feel prepared for college and future careers and are supported in reaching aspirations.
Perceived Learning Support System	…Perceive that there is a system in place to effectively link students to services which support their learning outside of the traditional classroom.
School Climate & Youth Development Pathway	
Perceived School Climate	…Perceive that the school demonstrates consistent, positive norms, values, relationships, and procedures.
Physical Activity & Nutrition	…Think that students practice healthy behaviors.
School Connectedness	…Perceive that students feel a sense of belonging to the school.
School Support of Pro-Social Activities	…Perceive that the school provides support for students to engage in socially responsible behaviors.
Student Safety	…Perceive that their students feel safe at home, at school, and in their communities.
Student Social Skills	…Perceive that their student engage in positive social interactions with others.
Teacher/Staff Commitment	…Feel that they are part of a dedicated, cohesive school team.
Non-Academic Barriers Pathway	
Internalizing Behaviors	…Perceive that their students experience negative feelings/behaviors directed towards themselves.
Externalizing Behaviors	…Perceive that their students engage in behaviors are directed outward, toward other people and/or property.
Student Psychological Well-being	…Perceive that students experience overall mental health.
Family Engagement & Community Environment Pathway	
Community Services & Supports	…Perceive that their students' families have access to needed services and supports within their community.
Community Supports for Positive Youth Development	…Perceive that the community supports students in engaging in socially responsible behaviors.
Family/Caregiver Support for Learning	…Perceive that families or caregivers are involved in students' education.
Family History	…Perceive that their students' families experience mental health or behavioral issues.
Family Support for Pro-Social Activities	…Perceive that students' families provide support for students to engage in socially responsible behaviors.
Support for Students' Basic Needs	…Perceive that students' families or caregivers have essential needs met.

Teacher/Staff Perceptions at Freshman Academy VTHS

Academic Learning

Category	Value
Academic Motivation	3.85
Academic Press	4.74
College & Career Readiness	3.36
Perceived Learning Support System	4.52

1 — Strongly Disagree ... 5 — Strongly Agree

School Climate & Youth Development

Category	Value
Perceived School Climate	4.53
School Connectedness	4.20
School Support of Pro-Social Activities	4.67
Student Safety	4.19
Student Social Skills	3.83
Teacher/Staff Commitment	4.42

1 — Strongly Disagree ... 5 — Strongly Agree

Family & Community

Category	Value
Community Services & Supports	3.84
Community Supports for Positive Youth Development	4.10
Family/Caregiver Support for Learning	3.21
Family History	4.03
Family Support for Pro-Social Activities	3.03
Support for Students' Basic Needs	3.88

1 — Strongly Disagree ... 5 — Strongly Agree

Non-Academic Barriers to Learning

Category	Value
Internalizing Behavior	4.27
Student Psychological Well Being	3.77
Externalizing Behavior	3.67

1 — Strongly Disagree ... 5 — Strongly Agree

This scale measure the extent to which teachers/staff perceive their students are interested and engaged in school.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Students have a positive attitude toward school.	4.40	0%	0%	7%	47%	47%	0%	0%
Students make the most of their school experiences.	3.73	0%	7%	27%	53%	13%	0%	0%
Students like the challenge of learning new things in school.	3.53	0%	13%	27%	53%	7%	0%	0%
Students are confident in their ability to manage their school work.	3.73	0%	0%	33%	60%	7%	0%	0%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Student Academic Motivation
% Frequently and Almost Always

Item	%
Students have a positive attitude toward school.	93%
Students make the most of their school experiences.	67%
Students like the challenge of learning new things in school.	60%
Students are confident in their ability to manage their school work.	67%
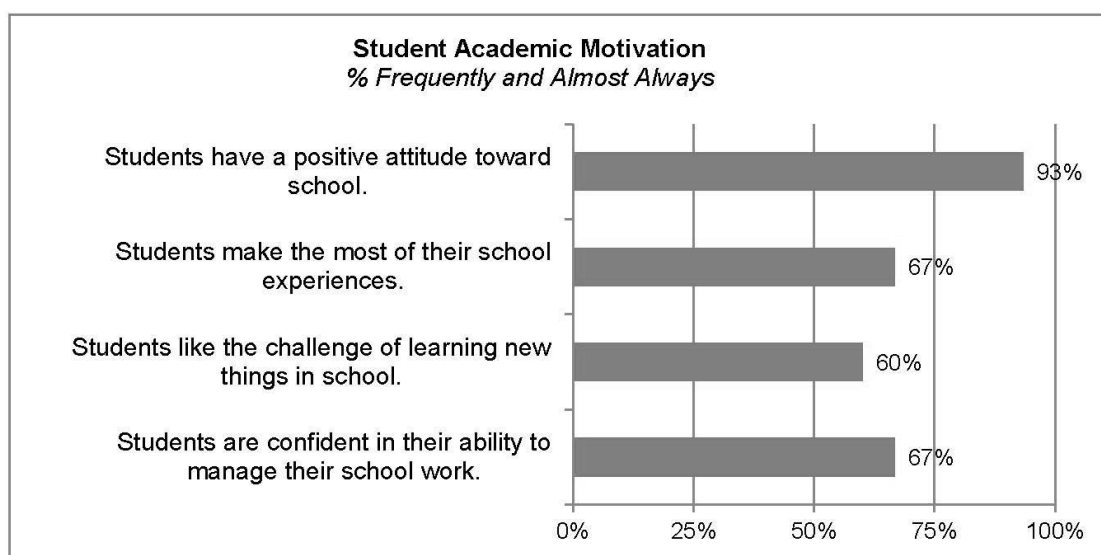
Note: Throughout this section, the percentages in the tables may not sum to 100% because of rounding. Similarly the percentages for "Frequently" & "Almost Always" displayed in the tables may be +/- 1% compared to the sum displayed in the chart, again due to rounding. Items for which 20% or more of respondents did not respond or "did not know" are not included in graphs.

Academic Press

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive a normative emphasis on academic success and conformity to specific standards of achievement across their school community.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Decisions at this school always focus on what is best for learning.	4.43	0%	7%	7%	20%	60%	7%	0%
Teachers provide helpful feedback to students about their academic performance.	4.79	0%	0%	0%	27%	73%	0%	0%
Teachers monitor whether students are learning on a regular basis.	5.00	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%
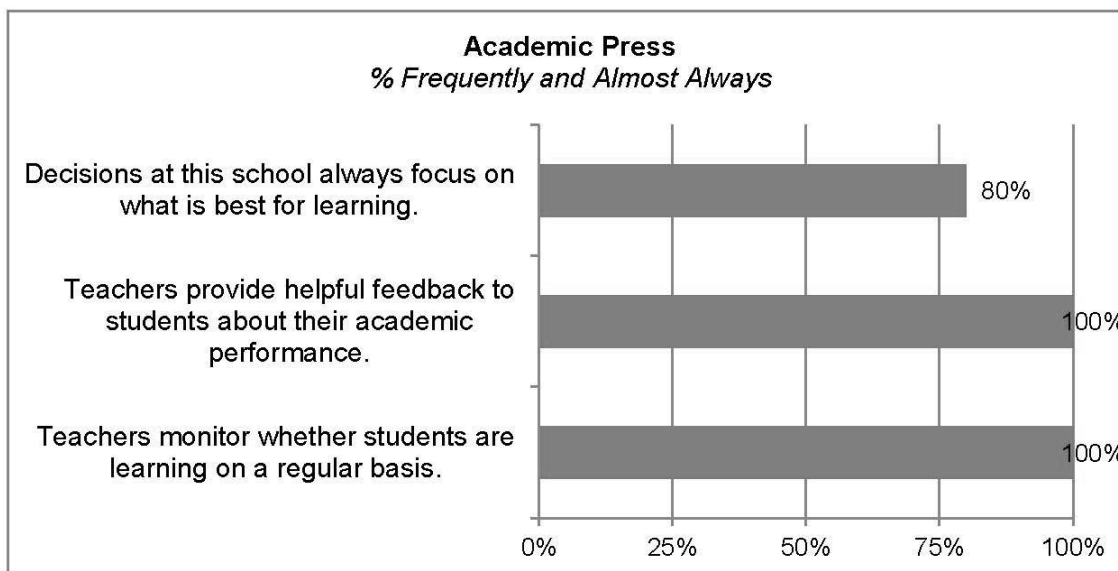
Academic Press
% Frequently and Almost Always

Decisions at this school always focus on what is best for learning.	80%
Teachers provide helpful feedback to students about their academic performance.	100%
Teachers monitor whether students are learning on a regular basis.	100%

Career and College Readiness

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that their students feel prepared for college and future careers and are supported in reaching their aspirations.

My Students…	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Set goals related to their education.	3.27	0%	33%	27%	33%	0%	0%	7%
Are confident they will reach their educational goals.	3.64	0%	0%	33%	47%	0%	13%	7%
Believe that what they learn in school will help them in the future.	3.27	7%	13%	33%	27%	7%	7%	7%
Want to go to college.	3.82	0%	7%	13%	53%	20%	0%	7%
Know how to prepare for college.	2.91	7%	33%	20%	33%	0%	0%	7%
Take classes that prepare them for college.	3.73	0%	7%	20%	60%	7%	0%	7%
Have adults in their lives who expect them to go to college.	3.45	0%	7%	40%	27%	7%	13%	7%
Have adults in their lives who encourage them to go to college.	3.45	0%	7%	33%	33%	7%	13%	7%
Have identified future careers that might interest them.	2.91	0%	27%	47%	20%	0%	0%	7%
Understand how school prepares them for future careers.	3.18	0%	13%	40%	33%	0%	7%	7%

College and Career Readiness
% Frequently and Almost Always

Set goals related to their education.	33%
Are confident they will reach their educational goals.	47%
Believe that what they learn in school will help them in the future.	33%
Want to go to college.	73%
Know how to prepare for college.	33%
Take classes that prepare them for college.	67%
Have adults in their lives who expect them to go to college.	33%
Have adults in their lives who encourage them to go to college.	40%
Have identified future careers that might interest them.	20%
Understand how school prepares them for future careers.	33%

Perceived Learning Support System

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that there is a system in place to effectively link students to services which support their learning outside of the traditional classroom.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Sometimes	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Students in need of extra learning supports in my school are able to get them.	4.87	0%	0%	0%	13%	87%	0%	0%
Teachers and staff in my school effectively refer students and families to support staff and other helping professionals when needed.	4.60	0%	0%	0%	40%	60%	0%	0%
There is a system in place in my school where teachers and staff can refer students and families who are in need of additional learning supports.	4.60	0%	0%	7%	27%	67%	0%	0%
Student learning problems are identified early and acted upon in my school.	4.27	0%	0%	7%	60%	33%	0%	0%
The learning supports and services in my school meet the needs of students.	4.27	0%	0%	7%	60%	33%	0%	0%

Perception of Student Learning Supports
% Frequently and Almost Always

Students in need of extra learning supports in my school are able to get them.	100%
Teachers and staff in my school effectively refer students and families to support staff and other helping professionals when needed.	100%
There is a system in place in my school where teachers and staff can refer students and families who are in need of additional learning supports.	93%
Student learning problems are identified early and acted upon in my school.	93%
The learning supports and services in my school meet the needs of students.	93%

Perceived School Climate

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that the school demonstrates consistent, positive norms, values, relationships, and procedures.

My School...	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Sets clear expectations for students.	4.60	0%	0%	7%	27%	67%	0%	0%
Is bully-free.	4.20	0%	0%	13%	53%	33%	0%	0%
Is physically safe.	4.67	0%	0%	7%	20%	73%	0%	0%
Is psychologically safe.	4.67	0%	0%	7%	20%	73%	0%	0%
Has adopted a clear set of rules.	4.60	0%	0%	13%	13%	73%	0%	0%
Has a clear discipline policy.	4.53	0%	0%	20%	7%	73%	0%	0%
Has a clear attendance policy.	4.33	0%	0%	27%	13%	60%	0%	0%
Has a positive climate.	4.60	0%	0%	7%	27%	67%	0%	0%
Embraces diversity.	4.53	0%	7%	0%	27%	67%	0%	0%

Perception of School Climate
% Frequently and Almost Always

- Sets clear expectations for students. 93%
- Is bully-free. 87%
- Is physically safe. 93%
- Is psychologically safe. 93%
- Has adopted a clear set of rules. 87%
- Has a clear discipline policy. 80%
- Has a clear attendance policy. 73%
- Has a positive climate. 93%
- Embraces diversity. 93%

Student School Connectedness

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that students feel a sense of belonging to the school.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Students enjoy coming to this school.	4.27	0%	0%	7%	60%	33%	0%	0%
Students have meaningful relationships with teachers.	4.53	0%	0%	0%	47%	53%	0%	0%
Students are proud to be students at this school.	3.93	0%	0%	20%	67%	13%	0%	0%
Students feel like they belong to this school.	4.07	0%	7%	7%	60%	27%	0%	0%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always).

Student School Connectedness
% Frequently and Almost Always

Item	%
Students enjoy coming to this school.	93%
Students have meaningful relationships with teachers.	100%
Students are proud to be students at this school.	80%
Students feel like they belong to this school.	87%

School Support of Pro-Social Activities

This scale measure the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that the school provides support for students to engage in socially responsible behaviors.

My School...	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Offers opportunities for students to be involved in pro-social activities.	4.71	0%	0%	7%	27%	67%	0%	0%
Reinforces student involvement in pro-social activities.	4.93	0%	0%	7%	7%	87%	0%	0%
Encourages student involvement in extracurricular activities.	4.93	0%	0%	0%	13%	87%	0%	0%
Supports student involvement in activities outside the school day.	4.79	0%	0%	0%	27%	73%	0%	0%
Partners with other organizations to offer students additional opportunities.	4.14	0%	0%	27%	27%	40%	7%	0%
Has teachers/staff who attend student activities.	4.50	0%	0%	0%	53%	47%	0%	0%

__Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always).

Perception of School Climate
% Frequently and Almost Always

Offers opportunities for students to be involved in pro-social activities.	93%
Reinforces student involvement in pro-social activities.	93%
Encourages student involvement in extracurricular activities.	100%
Supports student involvement in activities outside the school day.	100%
Partners with other organizations to offer students additional opportunities.	67%
Has teachers/staff who attend student activities.	100%

Student Safety

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that their students feel safe at home, at school, and in their communities.

My Students…	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Feel safe at home.	4.00	0%	7%	0%	40%	13%	33%	7%
Feel safe in their community.	4.11	0%	7%	7%	20%	33%	27%	7%
Feel safe at school.	4.44	0%	0%	0%	33%	53%	7%	7%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always).*

Student Safety
% Frequently and Almost Always

Feel safe at home.

Feel safe in their community.

Not graphed due to insuffcient data.
See table above for item statistics.

Feel safe at school.   87%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

Social Skills

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that their students engage in positive social interactions with others.

My Students...	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Are easy going and flexible.	3.79	0%	7%	20%	53%	13%	0%	7%
Ask others if they can be of help.	3.00	0%	27%	40%	27%	0%	0%	7%
Get along well with others.	4.14	0%	0%	7%	67%	20%	0%	7%
Have effective life skills.	3.71	0%	7%	20%	60%	7%	0%	7%
Have a sense of humor.	4.21	0%	0%	7%	60%	27%	0%	7%
Respect others.	4.14	0%	0%	7%	67%	20%	0%	7%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always).*

Student Social Skills
% Frequently and Almost Always

Are easy going and flexible.	67%
Ask others if they can be of help.	27%
Get along well with others.	87%
Have effective life skills.	67%
Have a sense of humor.	87%
Respect others.	87%

Teacher/Staff Commitment

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff feel that they are part of a dedicated, cohesive school team.

Teachers/staff at my school...	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Get along well together.	4.33	0%	0%	13%	40%	47%	0%	0%
Are committed to the school.	4.60	0%	0%	0%	40%	60%	0%	0%
Are proud to work at the school.	4.53	0%	0%	0%	47%	53%	0%	0%
Enjoy working at the school.	4.40	0%	0%	0%	60%	40%	0%	0%
Are well supported.	4.47	0%	0%	0%	53%	47%	0%	0%
Have high morale.	4.27	0%	0%	20%	33%	47%	0%	0%
Feel safe.	4.73	0%	0%	0%	27%	73%	0%	0%
Feel supported by administration.	4.13	0%	0%	13%	60%	27%	0%	0%
Have positive attitudes.	4.40	0%	7%	7%	27%	60%	0%	0%
Work together as a team.	4.47	0%	0%	13%	27%	60%	0%	0%
Feel like they are an important part of the school.	4.27	0%	0%	27%	20%	53%	0%	0%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always).

Teacher/Staff Commitment
% Frequently and Almost Always

Get along well together. — 87%
Are committed to the school. — 100%
Are proud to work at the school. — 100%
Enjoy working at the school. — 100%
Are well supported. — 100%
Have high morale. — 80%
Feel safe. — 100%
Feel supported by administration. — 87%
Have positive attitudes. — 87%
Work together as a team. — 87%
Feel like they are an important part of the school. — 73%

Internalizing Behaviors

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that their students experience negative feelings/behaviors directed toward themselves.

My Students...	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Are anxious/worried.	3.83	7%	60%	27%	0%	0%	7%	0%
Are sad/depressed.	4.17	20%	53%	7%	0%	0%	20%	0%
Are afraid.	4.50	47%	40%	0%	7%	0%	7%	0%
Are lonely.	4.33	40%	40%	7%	0%	0%	13%	0%
Feel like they do not matter.	4.50	47%	40%	0%	0%	0%	13%	0%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost always) to 5 (Almost never).

Student Internalizing Behaviors
% Frequently and Almost Always

Are anxious/worried.	0%
Are sad/depressed.	0%
Are afraid.	7%
Are lonely.	0%
Feel like they do not matter.	0%

Externalizing Behaviors

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that their students engage in behaviors are directed outward, toward other people and/or property.

My Students…	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Demonstrate poor attention spans.	3.64	0%	73%	7%	13%	0%	7%	0%
Demonstrate hyperactivity or restlessness.	3.64	7%	60%	13%	13%	0%	7%	0%
Are impulsive.	3.71	13%	53%	13%	13%	0%	7%	0%

*** Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost always) to 5 (Almost never).*
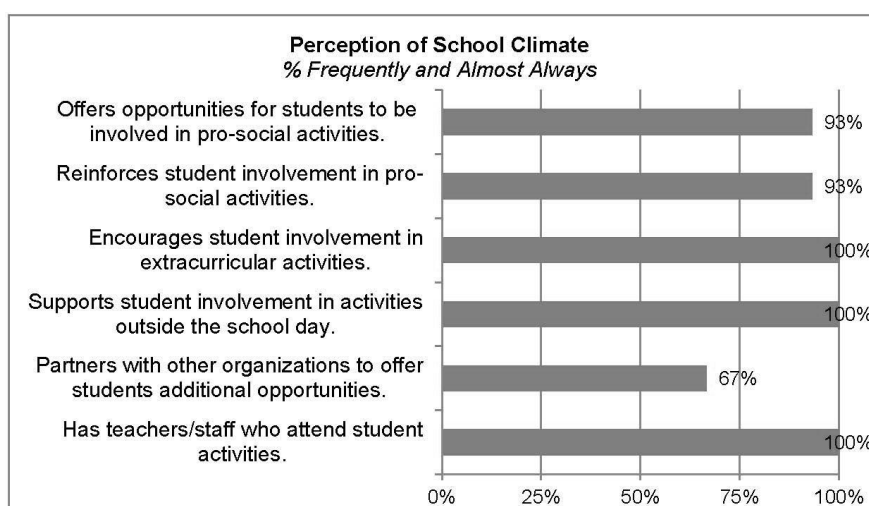
Student Externalizing Behaviors
% Frequently and Almost Always

Demonstrate poor attention spans.	13%
Demonstrate hyperactivity or restlessness.	13%
Are impulsive.	13%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%
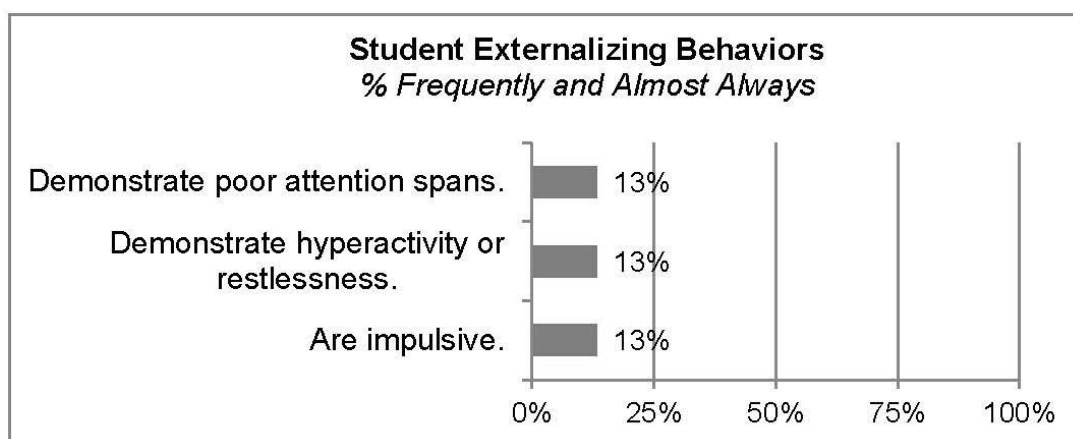
Student Psychological Well Being

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that students experience overall mental health.

My Students...	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Have positive mental health.	3.79	0%	0%	27%	60%	7%	7%	0%
Have self-confidence.	3.64	0%	7%	27%	53%	7%	7%	0%
Feel they have a sense of purpose.	3.79	0%	0%	27%	60%	7%	7%	0%
Feel they have control over their actions.	3.86	0%	0%	20%	67%	7%	7%	0%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always).
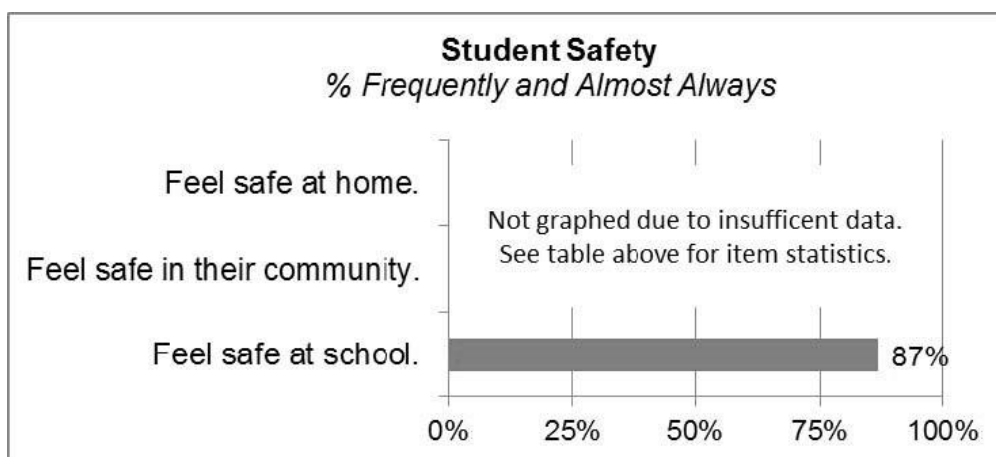
Student Psychological Well-Being
% Frequently and Almost Always

Have positive mental health.	67%
Have self-confidence.	60%
Feel they have a sense of purpose.	67%
Feel they have control over their…	73%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

Community Services and Supports

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that their students' families have access to needed services and supports within their community.

My students' community…	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Has accessible services and supports available for families.	3.82	0%	13%	0%	47%	13%	13%	13%
Has quality services and supports available for families.	3.82	0%	13%	0%	47%	13%	13%	13%
Has services and supports in place to meet the needs of families.	3.82	0%	13%	0%	47%	13%	13%	13%
Has enough services and supports available for families.	3.91	0%	13%	0%	40%	20%	13%	13%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always)
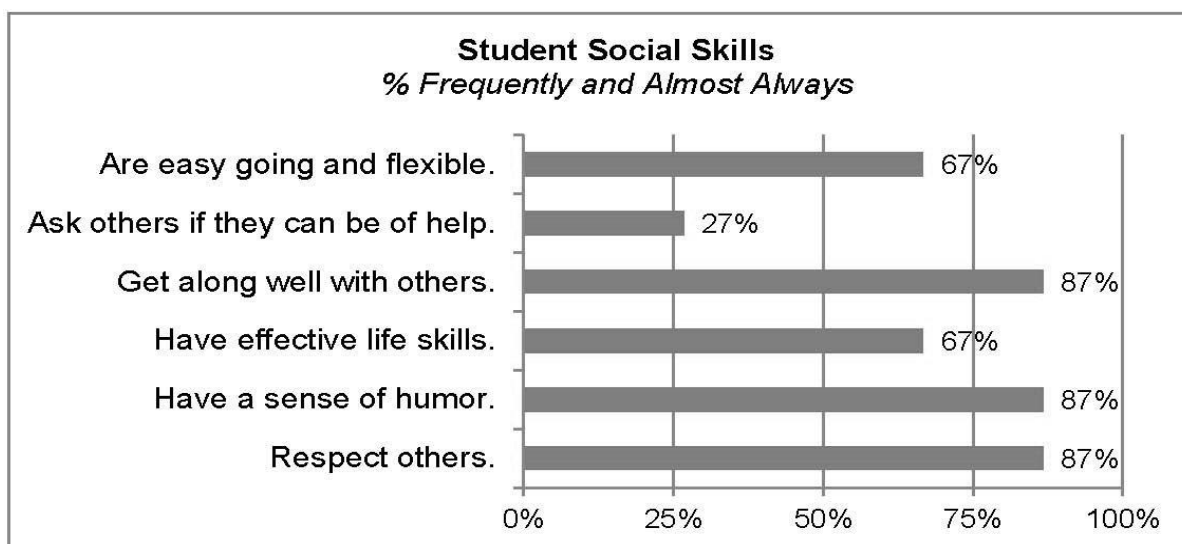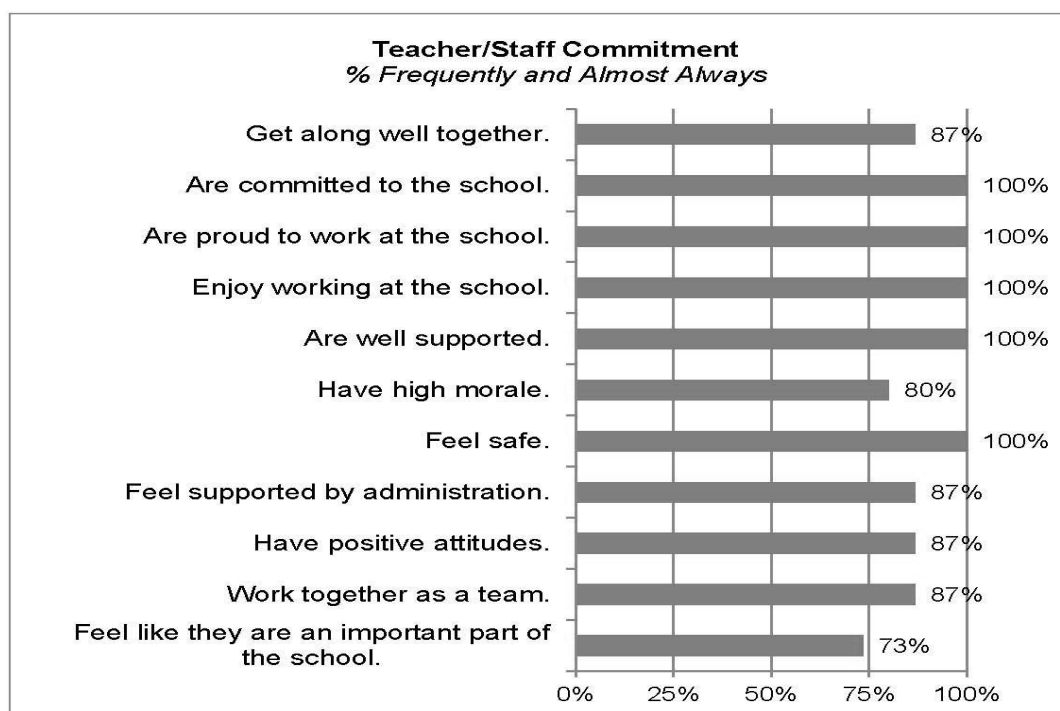
Services and Supports
% Frequently and Almost Always

Has accessible services and supports available for families.	60%
Has quality services and supports available for families.	60%
Has services and supports in place to meet the needs of families.	60%
Has enough services and supports available for families.	60%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%
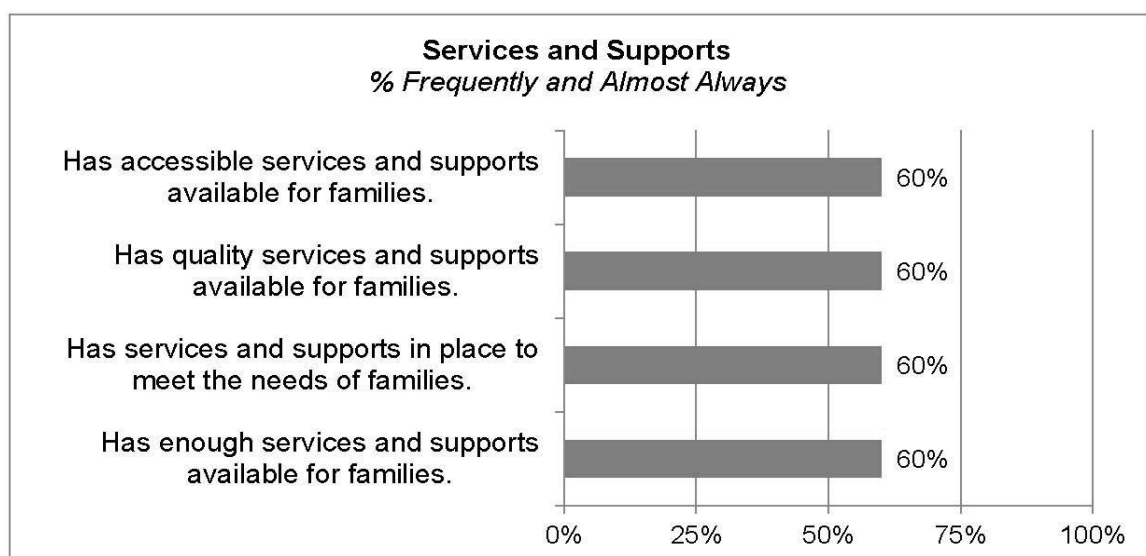
Community Supports for Positive Youth Development

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that the community supports students in engaging in socially responsible behaviors.

My students' community...	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Provides opportunities for youth to be involved in pro-social activities.	4.15	0%	0%	7%	60%	20%	7%	7%
Reinforces youth involvement in pro-social activities.	4.15	0%	0%	7%	60%	20%	7%	7%
Views youth as valuable assests.	4.00	0%	0%	13%	60%	13%	7%	7%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always).
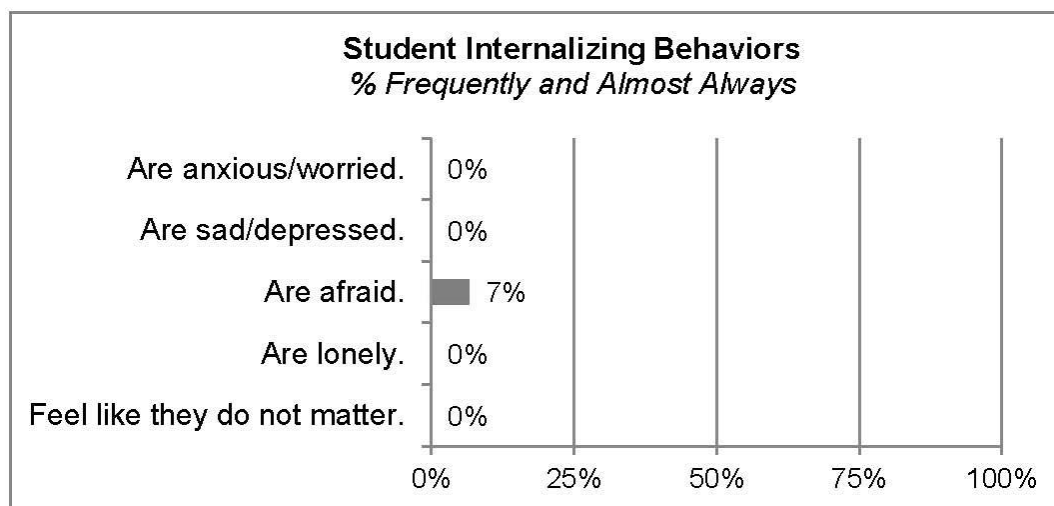
Supports Positive Youth Development
% Frequently and Almost Always

Provides opportunities for youth to be involved in pro-social activities.	80%
Reinforces youth involvement in pro-social activities.	80%
Views youth as valuable assests.	73%
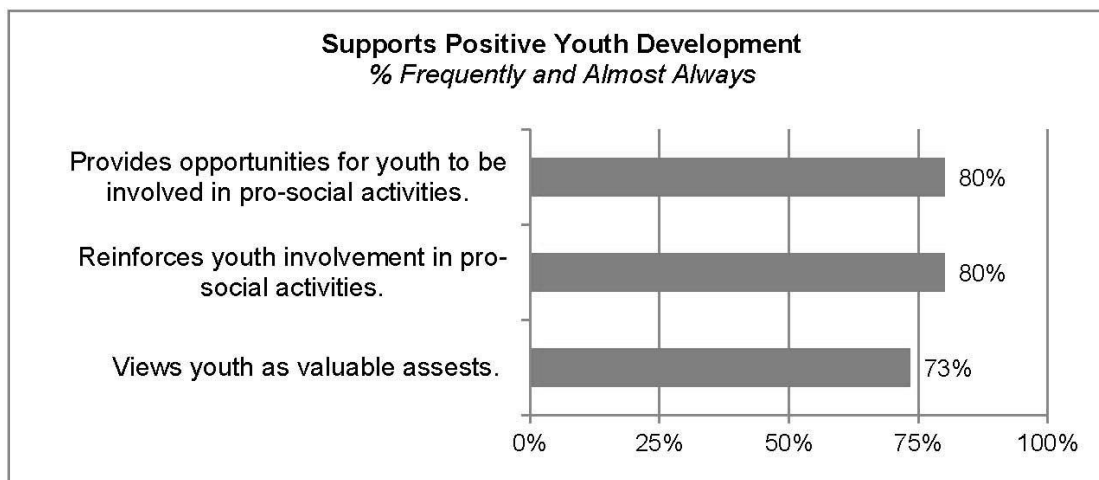
Family/Caregiver Support for Learning

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that families or caregivers are involved in students' education.

My students' families or caregivers…	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some- times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Support their children with their schoolwork.	3.08	0%	20%	40%	27%	0%	7%	7%
Attend meetings at the school.	2.69	7%	33%	27%	20%	0%	7%	7%
Show they care about their child's education.	3.31	0%	13%	40%	27%	7%	7%	7%
Show respect for teachers.	3.77	0%	0%	27%	53%	13%	0%	7%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all participants. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always).

Family/Caregiver Support for Learning
% Frequently and Almost Always

Support their children with their schoolwork.	27%
Attend meetings at the school.	20%
Show they care about their child's education.	33%
Show respect for teachers.	67%
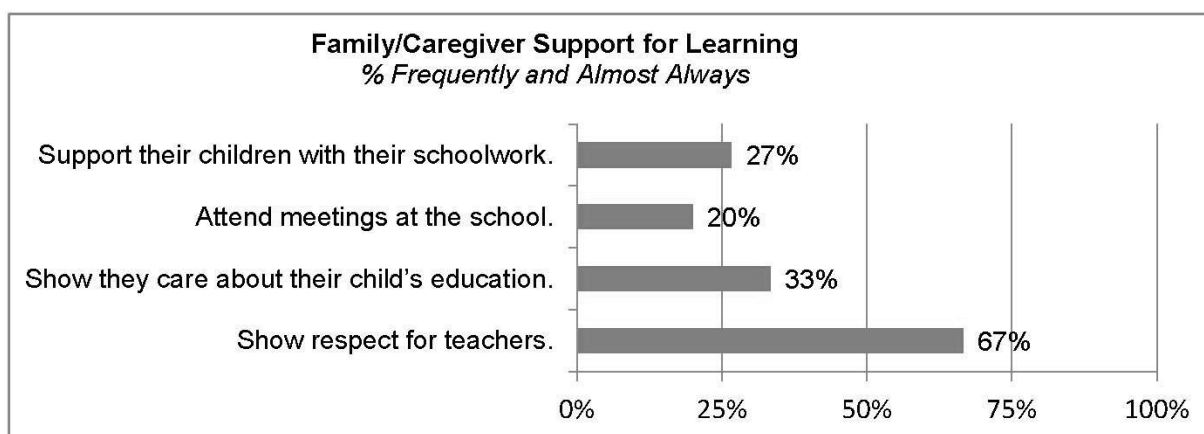
Family History

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that their students' families experience mental health or behavioral issues.

My students' families or caregivers...	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Have a history of mental health problems.	3.89	7%	53%	7%	0%	0%	27%	7%
Have a history of problem behaviors.	3.89	0%	67%	13%	0%	0%	13%	7%
Are suspected of abuse and/or neglect.	4.22	20%	47%	0%	0%	0%	27%	7%
Are involved in the child welfare system.	4.11	7%	60%	0%	0%	0%	27%	7%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost always) to 5 (Almost never).
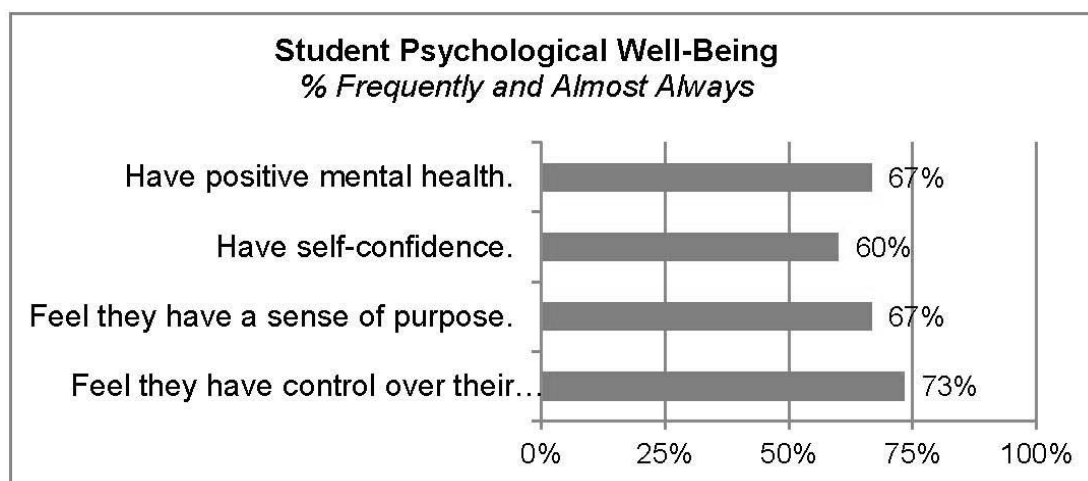
Family History
% Frequently and Almost Always

Have a history of mental health problems.

Have a history of problem behaviors.

Are suspected of abuse and/or neglect.

Are involved in the child welfare system.

Not graphed due to insufficent data.
See table above for item statistics.

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

Family Support for Pro-Social Activities

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that students' families provide support for students to engage in socially responsible behaviors.

My students' families or caregivers...	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Offer opportunities for their children to be involved in pro-social activities.	3.09	7%	20%	13%	27%	7%	20%	7%
Reinforce their children's involvement in pro-social activities.	3.18	7%	7%	33%	20%	7%	20%	7%
Volunteer and/or participate in their children's pro-social activities.	2.82	0%	33%	33%	13%	0%	13%	7%

***Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always).*

Family Support of Pro-Social Activities
% Frequently and Almost Always

Offer opportunities for their children to be involved in pro-social activities.	33%
Reinforce their children's involvement in pro-social activities.	27%
Volunteer and/or participate in their children's pro-social activities.	13%

0% 25% 50% 75% 100%
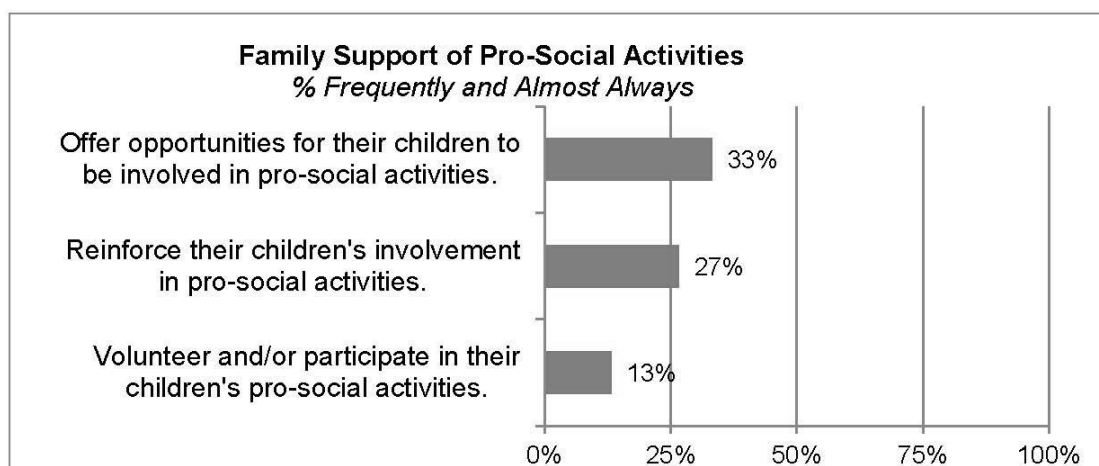
Support for Students' Basic Needs

This scale measures the extent to which teachers and staff perceive that students' families or caregivers have essential needs met.

My students' families or caregivers...	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Have their basic needs met (i.e., food, shelter, clothing).	4.09	0%	7%	0%	53%	20%	13%	7%
Have stable employment.	3.64	0%	7%	13%	53%	0%	20%	7%
Have stable housing.	3.91	0%	7%	13%	47%	13%	13%	7%

** Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Amost never) to 5 (Almost always).

Support for Students' Basic Needs
% Frequently and Almost Always

Have their basic needs met (i.e., food, shelter, clothing).	73%
Have stable employment.	53%
Have stable housing.	60%
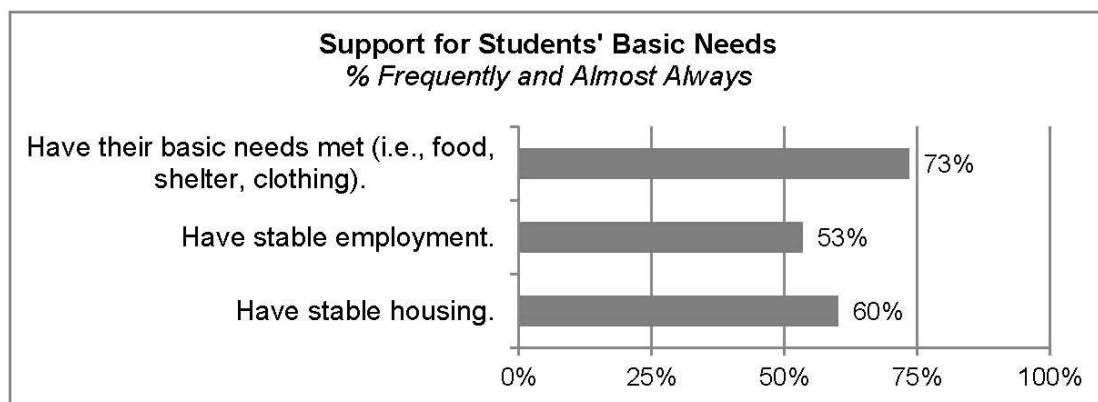
District Added Questions

The items shown here were asked specifically by request of the Freshman Academy VTHS.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice						
		Almost never	Some-times	Half of the time	Frequently	Almost always	Don't Know	No Response
Decisions made at VTHS Freshman Academy are team-based	4.40	0%	0%	0%	27%	60%	0%	13%
The VTHS Freshman Academy is effective in creating smaller learning communitites.	3.73	0%	0%	0%	33%	53%	0%	13%
Common planning time allows for teacher colaboration among VTHS Freshman Academy teachers.	3.53	0%	0%	0%	13%	67%	7%	13%
Common planning time provides opportunities to enhance student supports.	3.73	0%	0%	0%	13%	67%	7%	13%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always).
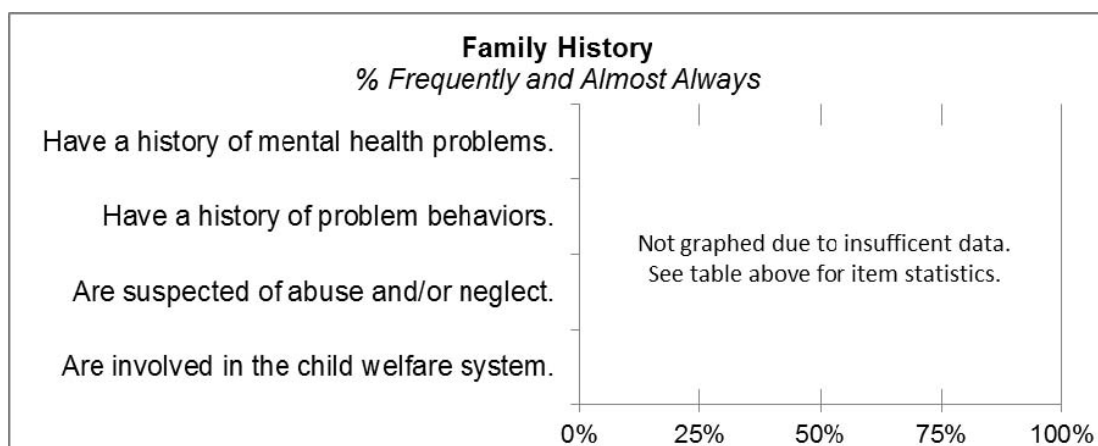

District Added Questions
% Frequently and Almost Always

Decisions made at VTHS Freshman Academy are team-based — 87%
The VTHS Freshman Academy is effective in creating smaller learning communitites. — 87%
Common planning time allows for teacher colaboration among VTHS Freshman Academy teachers. — 80%
Common planning time provides opportunities to enhance student supports. — 80%
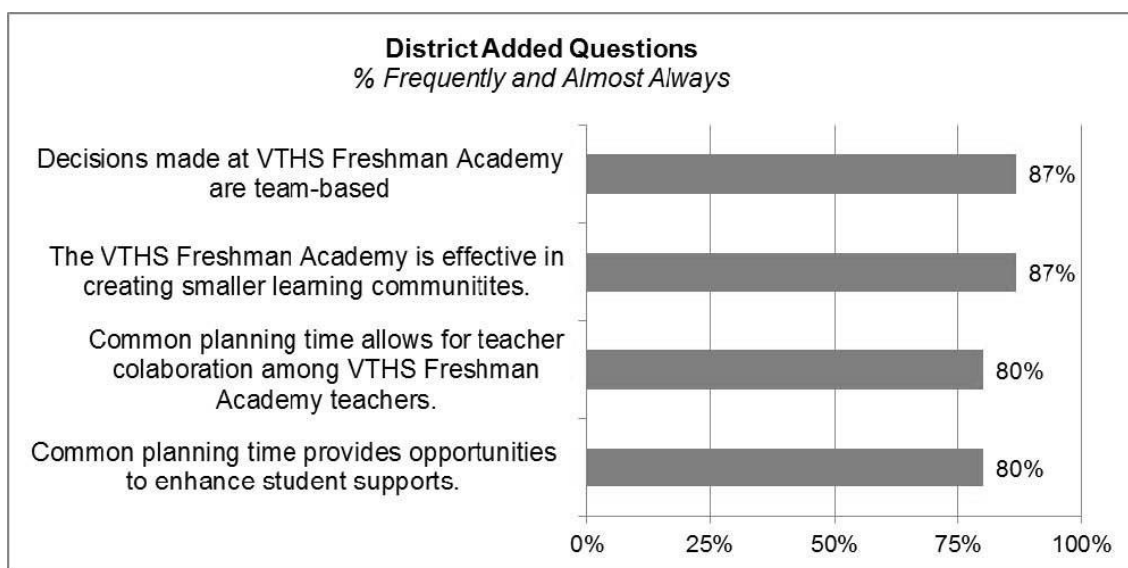
Appendix J: The Ohio State Freshman Academy Student Survey results

MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL CAYCI-SES CONSTRUCTS	
Academic Learning Pathway	
Academic Motivation	The degree to which students' express general interest, engagement, and enjoyment in learning and school.
Academic Press	The degree to which students perceive a normative emphasis on academic success and conformity to specific standards of achievement across their school community (including teachers and other students).
Support for Learning	The degree to which students perceive they receive support for their learning from their family and teachers/school staff.
Career and College Readiness	The degree to which students perceive they are prepared for college and future careers and are supported by their school in reaching aspirations.
School Climate and Youth Development Pathway	
School Connectedness	The degree to which students enjoy and feel like they belong to the school.
Social Skills	The degree to which students perceive they are able to engage in positive social interactions with others.
Peer Relationships	The degree to which students feel they are supported by and have positive relationships with their peers.
Parental Involvement	The degree to which students feel that their parents and guardians are involved in their learning and support their educational growth.
Family/Community Connections	The degree to which students report that they feel a sense of belonging and responsibility to their families and communities.
Diversity	The degree to which students perceive that their school community accepts and supports students from different cultures and backgrounds.
School Safety	The degree to which students perceive that they are safe at home, at school, and in their communities.
Activities	The extent to which students report participating in school and community activities.
Physical Activity	The frequency at which student report engaging in the recommended level of physical activity.
Non-Academic Barriers Pathway	
Internalizing Behaviors	The degree to which students report negative feelings/behaviors that are directed inward towards themselves.
Externalizing Behaviors	The degree to which students report behaviors that are directed outward, either toward other people and/or property.
Bullying	The degree to which students report engaging in or being victimized through interactions that they perceive to be bullying.
Alcohol, Tobacco, and Drug Use	The degree to which students report using alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

Student Perceptions

Student Perceptions at Freshman Academy VTHS
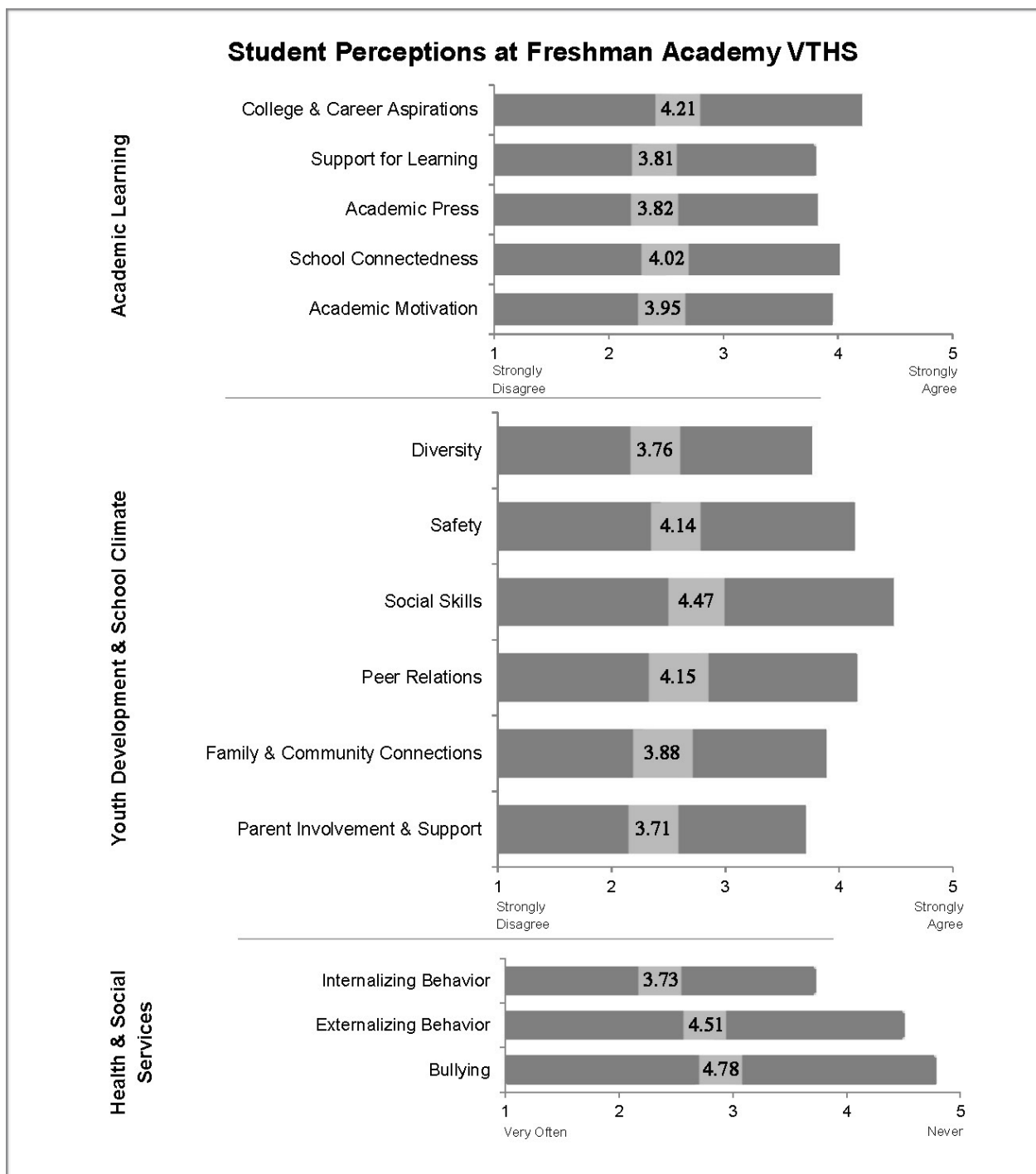
Academic Motivation

This scale measure students' general interst, engagement, and enjoyment in learning and school.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Response
I have a positive attitude toward school.	4.12	0%	4%	18%	38%	40%	0%
I feel I have made the most of my school experiences so far.	3.67	7%	7%	20%	42%	22%	2%
I like the challenges of learning new things in school.	4.09	4%	0%	13%	42%	36%	4%
I am confident in my ability to manage my school work.	4.14	2%	4%	7%	53%	31%	2%
I feel my school experience is preparing me well for adulthood.	3.51	7%	13%	16%	49%	13%	2%
I have enjoyed my school experience so far.	4.16	0%	4%	11%	44%	38%	2%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Academic Motivation
% Agree or Strongly Agree

- I have a positive attitude toward school. — 78%
- I feel I have made the most of my school experiences so far. — 64%
- I like the challenges of learning new things in school. — 78%
- I am confident in my ability to manage my school work. — 84%
- I feel my school experience is preparing me well for adulthood. — 62%
- I have enjoyed my school experience so far. — 82%
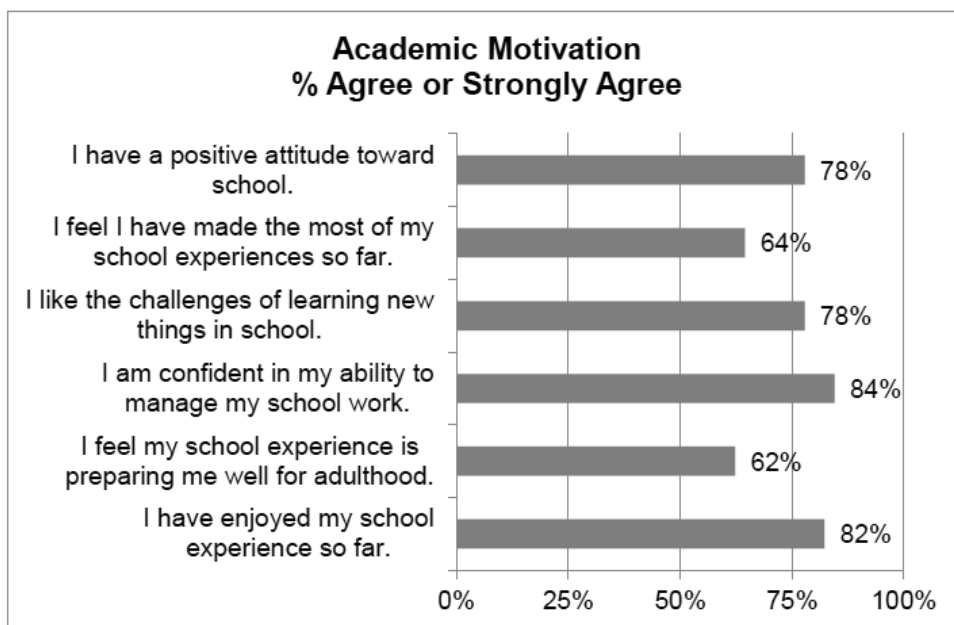
Academic Press

This scale measures the students' overall experience of normative emphasis on acadmic success and conformity to specific standards of achievement across their school community.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Response
Decisions at my school always focus on what is best for learning.	3.60	0%	11%	24%	42%	11%	11%
My teachers provide helpful feedback to students about their academic performance.	3.93	0%	9%	11%	47%	22%	11%
My teachers monitor whether students are learning on a regular basis.	3.75	0%	11%	13%	51%	13%	11%
My school values students' learning.	4.00	2%	4%	9%	49%	24%	11%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Academic Press
% Agree or Strongly Agree

Decisions at my school always focus on what is best for learning. — 53%
My teachers provide helpful feedback to students about their academic performance. — 69%
My teachers monitor whether students are learning on a regular basis. — 64%
My school values students' learning. — 73%
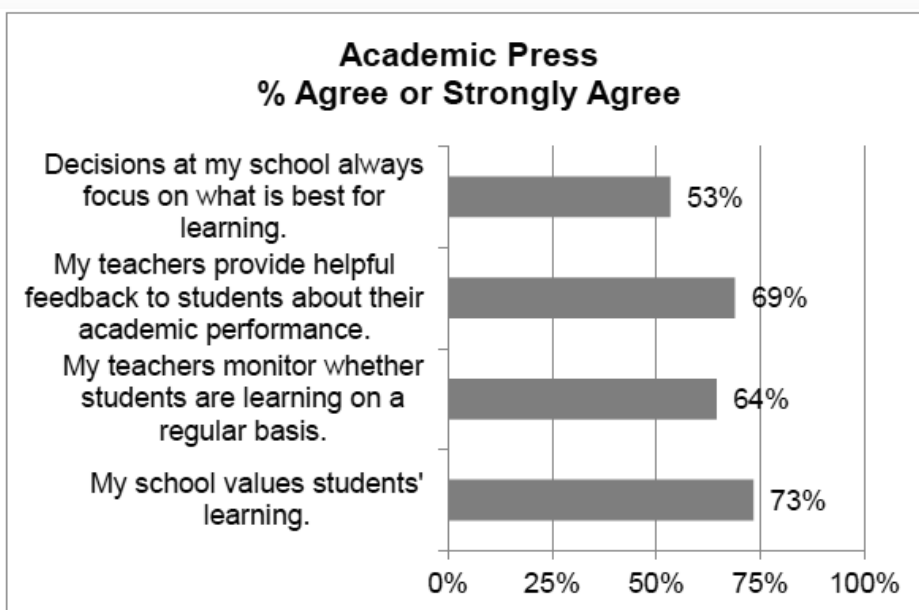
Support for Learning

This scale measures students' experiences of the support their family and school staff provide for their learning and social-emotional development.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Response
When I have a problem, I get help from my family.	3.88	2%	11%	18%	31%	29%	9%
When I have a problem, I get help from my teacher.	3.53	4%	9%	24%	38%	13%	11%
I would go to my teacher for help if I needed it.	3.73	2%	4%	27%	38%	18%	11%
My teacher(s) would notice if I was not in school.	4.10	0%	4%	16%	36%	33%	11%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).*

**Support for Learning
% Agree and Strongly Agree**

When I have a problem, I get help from my family.	60%
When I have a problem, I get help from my teacher.	51%
I would go to my teacher for help if I needed it.	56%
My teacher(s) would notice if I was not in school.	69%
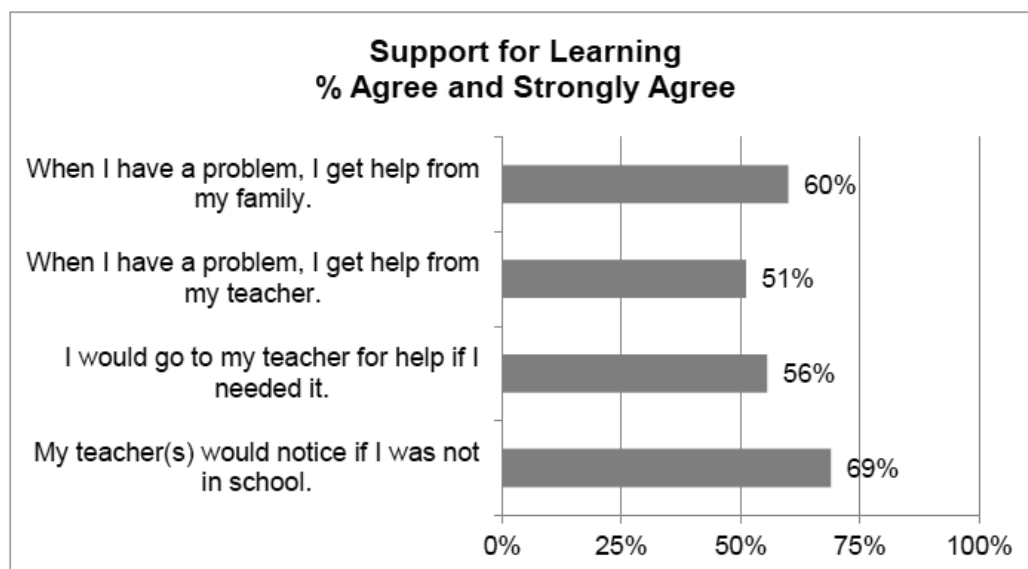
Career and College Readiness

This scale measures the extent to which students perceive their own self efficacy and preparedness for college and/or their future careers and are supported in reaching aspirations.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Response
What I learn in school will help me get the job I want.	3.40	11%	13%	16%	27%	22%	11%
I set goals that will help me get the job I want.	4.15	0%	2%	18%	33%	36%	11%
I am confident that I will graduate from high school.	4.75	0%	0%	2%	18%	69%	11%
What I learn in school will help me go to college.	4.20	4%	0%	11%	31%	42%	11%
I set goals that will help me go to college.	4.18	4%	2%	9%	31%	42%	11%
I am confident that I will go to college.	4.33	2%	2%	9%	27%	49%	11%
I am confident that I will get the job I want.	4.35	0%	4%	9%	27%	49%	11%
I am confident that I will reach my career goals.	4.30	0%	4%	9%	31%	44%	11%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

College and Career Readiness
% Agree and Strongly Agree

What I learn in school will help me get the job I want.	49%
I set goals that will help me get the job I want.	69%
I am confident that I will graduate from high school.	87%
What I learn in school will help me go to college.	73%
I set goals that will help me go to college.	73%
I am confident that I will go to college.	76%
I am confident that I will get the job I want.	76%
I am confident that I will reach my career goals.	76%

School Connectedness

This scale assesses the overall perceptions of students' school experiences.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Response
I enjoy coming to school.	3.98	0%	4%	20%	47%	27%	2%
I am proud to be a student at my school.	4.02	0%	0%	22%	51%	24%	2%
I feel like I belong at my school.	4.05	0%	0%	20%	53%	24%	2%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).
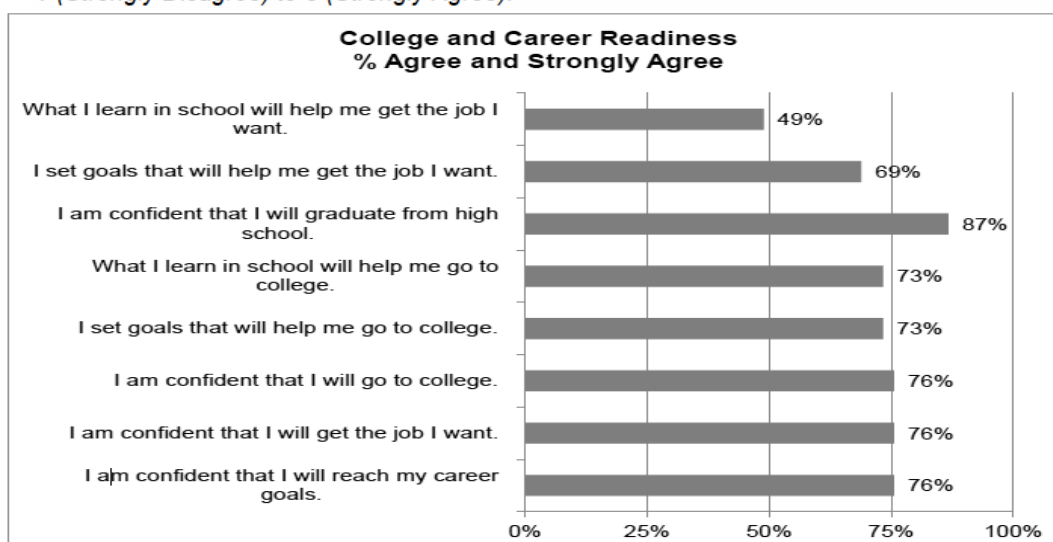
School Connectedness
% Agree or Strongly Agree

I enjoy coming to school. — 73%

I am proud to be a student at my school. — 76%

I feel like I belong at my school. — 78%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%
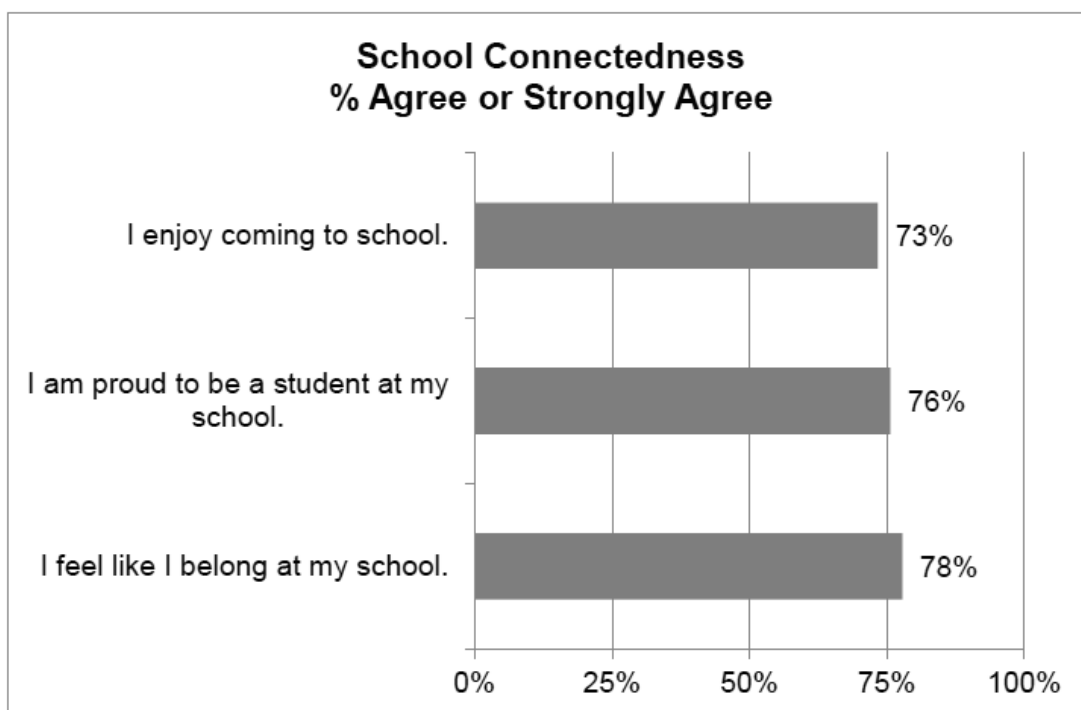
Peer Relationships

This scale measures the extent to which students feel they are supported by and have positive relationships with their peers.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Response
My friends support and care about me.	4.23	2%	0%	11%	38%	38%	11%
My friends think I am a positive person.	4.18	0%	2%	18%	31%	38%	11%
My friends are people who I can trust.	4.15	2%	2%	11%	38%	36%	11%
My friends do nice things for other people.	4.05	0%	2%	20%	36%	29%	13%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Peer Relationships
% Agree or Strongly Agree

My friends support and care about me.	76%
My friends think I am a positive person.	69%
My friends are people who I can trust.	73%
My friends do nice things for other people.	64%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%
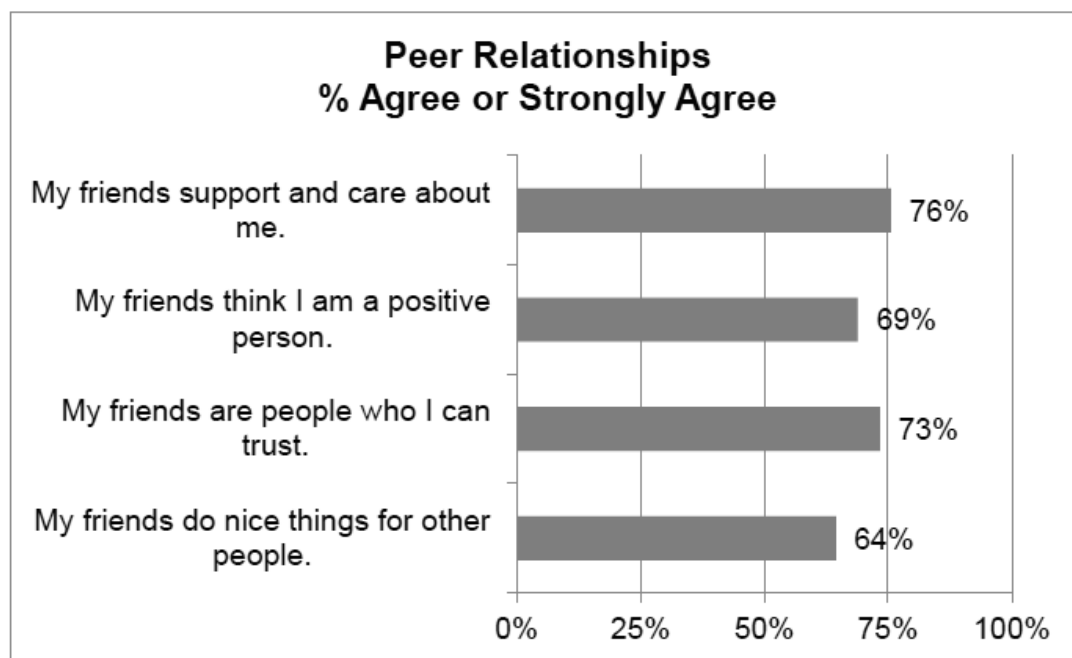
Social Skills

This scale measures the ability of students to engage in positive social interactions with others.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Not at all	A little	Some	A lot	Very much	No Response
I respect others.	4.59	0%	0%	4%	27%	56%	13%
I am responsible.	4.41	0%	2%	9%	29%	49%	11%
I work well with others.	4.23	2%	2%	16%	24%	44%	11%
I am a good friend.	4.67	0%	0%	0%	31%	58%	11%

*Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much).
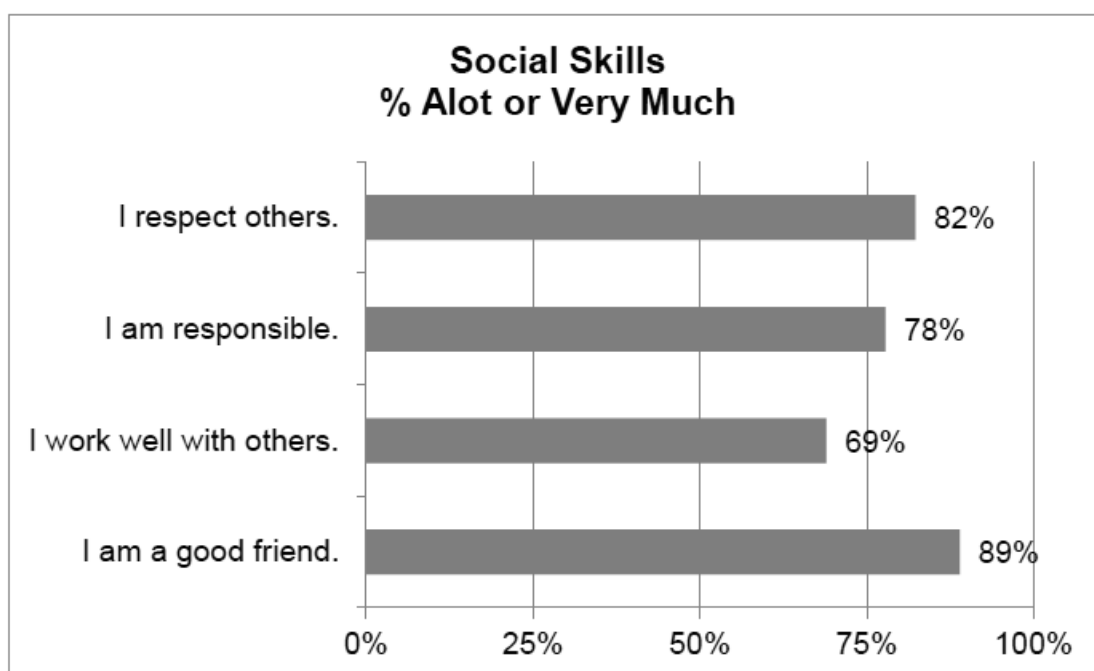
Parental Involvement

This scale measures the degree to which students report that their parents and caregivers are involved in their learning and support their educational growth.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Response
My parents help me with my schoolwork.	2.74	13%	27%	27%	13%	9%	11%
My parents talk to me about what I do in school.	3.87	2%	7%	13%	42%	22%	13%
My parents ask me about my schoolwork.	3.97	2%	4%	18%	31%	33%	11%
My parents push me to work hard at school.	4.23	2%	2%	13%	24%	47%	11%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).*


Parental Involvement & Support
% Agree or Strongly Agree

- My parents help me with my schoolwork. — 22%
- My parents talk to me about what I do in school. — 64%
- My parents ask me about my schoolwork. — 64%
- My parents push me to work hard at school. — 71%
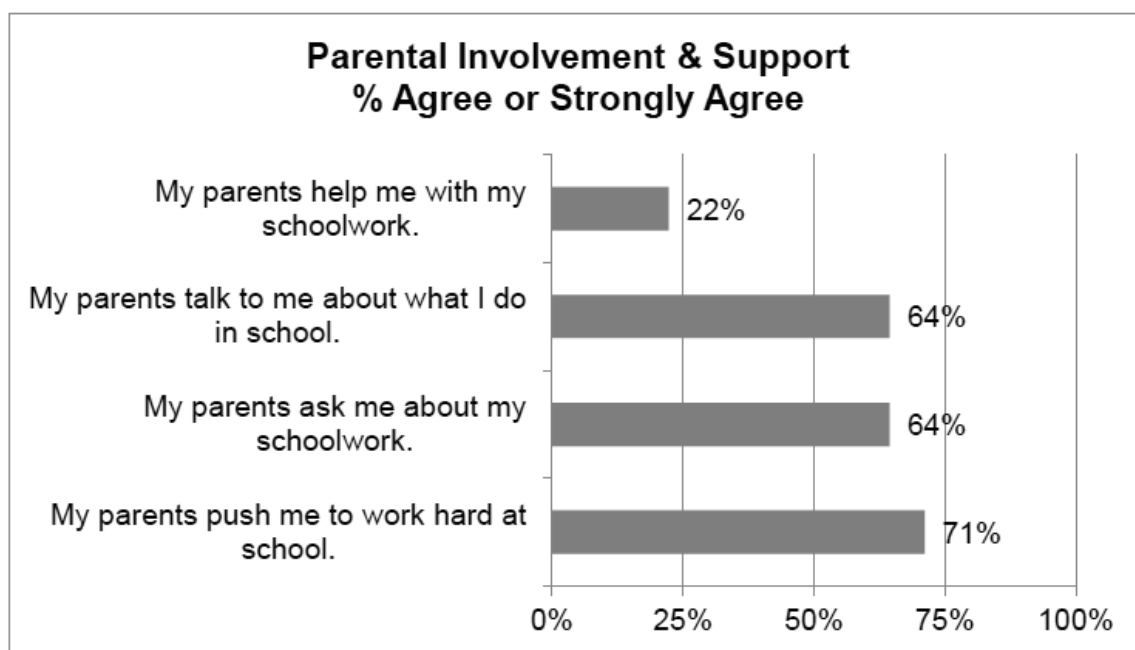
Family/Community Connections

This scale measures whether students feel a sense of belonging, social responsibility, and meaningful relationships with their families and community.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Response
I feel like I really belong to my family.	4.25	0%	2%	11%	38%	38%	11%
I have a sense of responsibility to the community I live in.	3.83	2%	4%	22%	38%	22%	11%
I feel like I am an important part of my community	3.53	7%	9%	29%	20%	24%	11%
There are responsible adults in my community who support and encourage me.	3.93	4%	7%	13%	31%	33%	11%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Family & Community Connections
% Agree or Strongly Agree

I feel like I really belong to my family.	76%
I have a sense of responsibility to the community I live in.	60%
I feel like I am an important part of my community	44%
There are responsible adults in my community who support and encourage me.	64%

Diversity

This scale measures the degree to which students perceive that their school community accepts and supports a diverse student population.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Response
At my school, students treat others who are different from them with respect.	3.47	2%	13%	20%	33%	13%	18%
At my school, teachers and other school staff treat all students with respect regardless of background or culture.	4.14	2%	2%	11%	33%	33%	18%
At my school, all students are treated equally.	3.61	7%	9%	16%	27%	24%	18%
At my school, it's ok to be different.	3.78	4%	7%	20%	20%	29%	20%
At my school, all students are treated the same regardless of where they come from.	3.78	9%	9%	13%	18%	33%	18%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree)
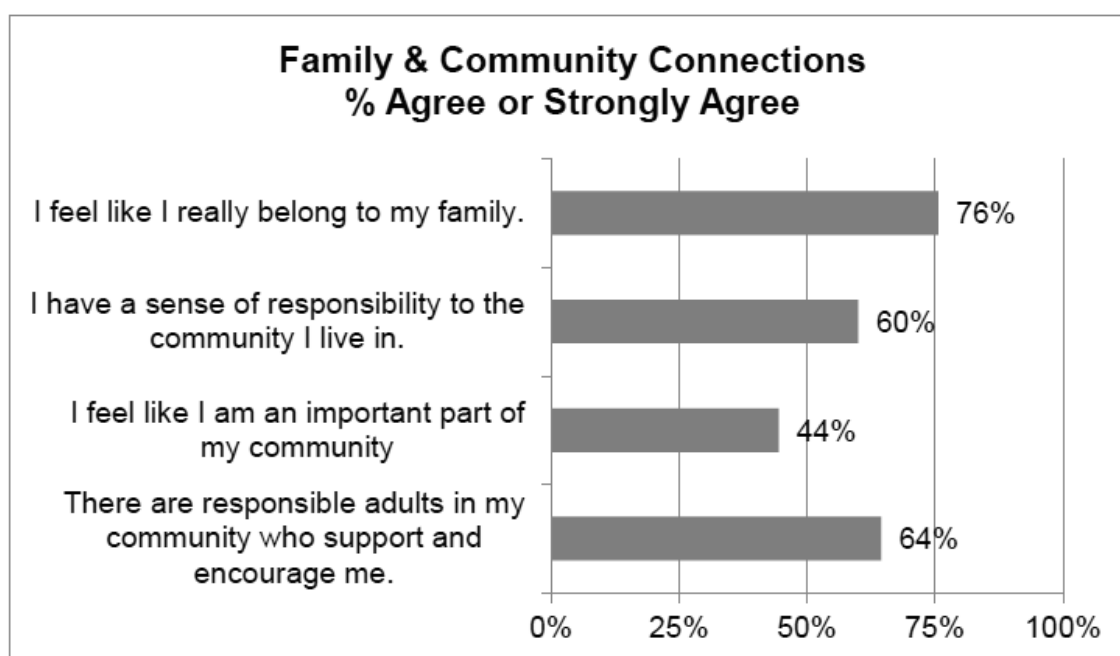

Diversity
% Agree or Strongly Agree

At my school, students treat others who are different from them with respect. — 47%

At my school, teachers and other school staff treat all students with respect regardless of background or culture. — 67%

At my school, all students are treated equally. — 51%

At my school, it's ok to be different. — 49%

At my school, all students are treated the same regardless of where they come from. — 51%

Safety

This scale measures students' perceptions of their own personal safety at home, at school, and in their communities.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Response
I feel safe in the community.	4.14	4%	2%	9%	36%	33%	16%
I feel safe at school.	4.03	4%	2%	11%	38%	29%	16%
I feel safe getting to and from school.	4.24	0%	2%	11%	33%	36%	18%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).
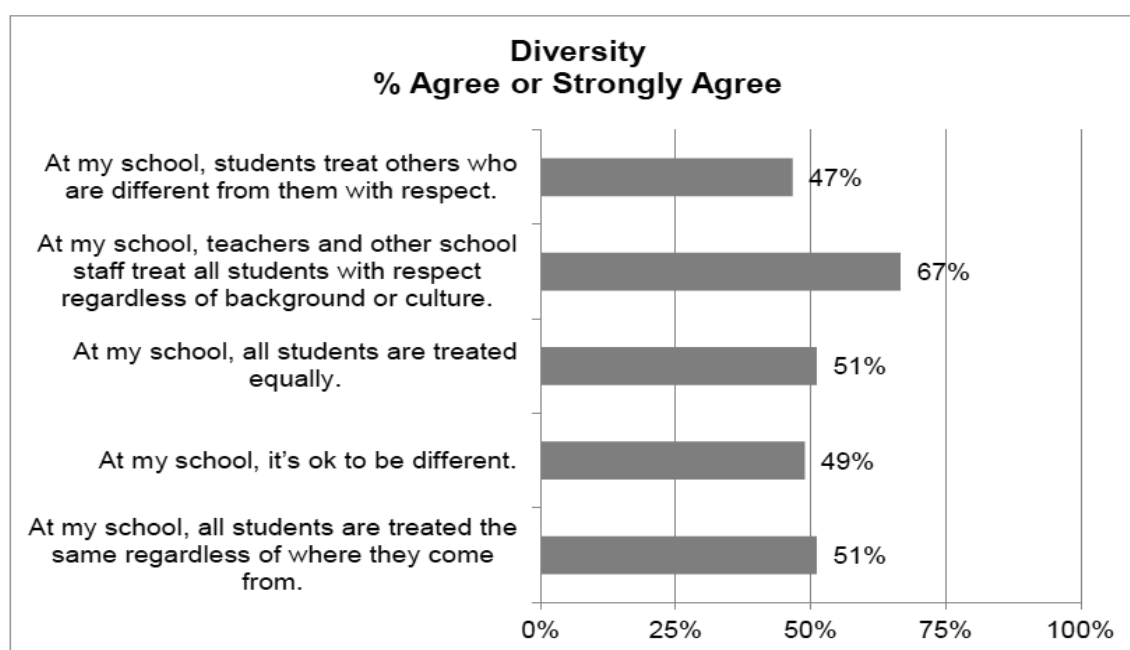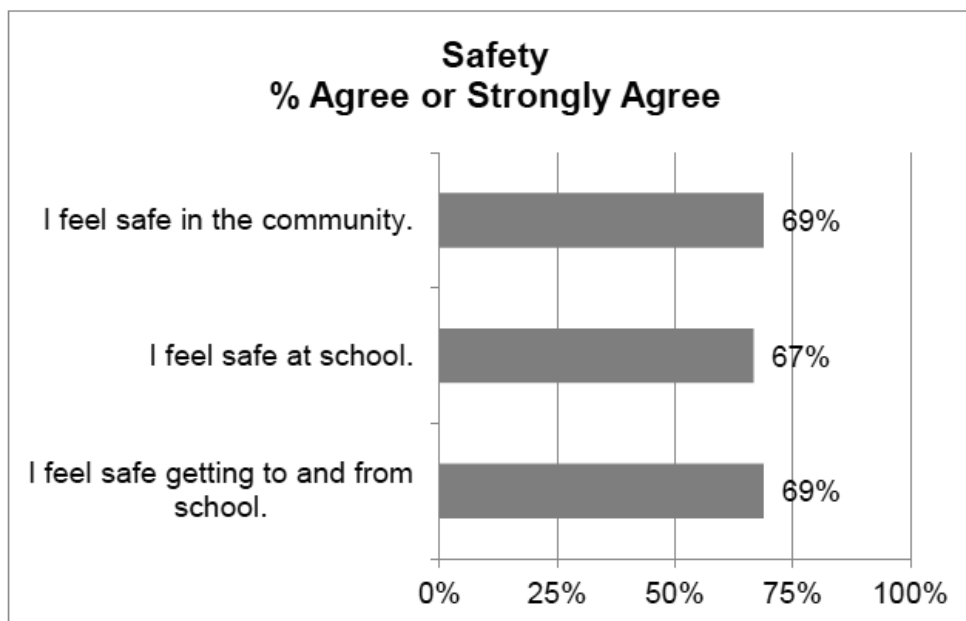

Safety
% Agree or Strongly Agree

I feel safe in the community. 69%
I feel safe at school. 67%
I feel safe getting to and from school. 69%

Activities

These questions measure the extent to which students report participating in school and community activities such as afterschool programming, volunteerism, or youth sport.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice			
		Not involved at all	Involved to some extent	Actively involved	No Response
I play on a sports team.	2.32	20%	18%	47%	16%
I play a musical instrument.	2.03	38%	7%	40%	16%
I am in a dance or theater group or class.	1.51	53%	16%	13%	18%
I am involved in community volunteering (Nursing Home, Child Care Centers, etc.)	1.79	36%	31%	18%	16%
I am in a youth group or church.	1.84	38%	20%	24%	18%
I am in a youth program (4-H, YMCA, Boys and Girls Club).	1.50	58%	11%	16%	16%
I have a job after school or on the weekend.	1.76	44%	16%	24%	16%
I am involved in social networking sites (Facebook, Myspace, Snapchat, etc.).	2.63	7%	18%	60%	16%
I am involved in leadership groups (Student Council, Student Government, etc.).	1.49	53%	18%	11%	18%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Not involved at all) to 3 (Actively involved).

Internalizing Behaviors

This scale measures the extent to which students report feelings and behaviors that are negative and directed inward towards themselves.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Response
In the past week, I felt sad.	3.48	20%	29%	16%	22%	2%	11%
In the past week, I felt afraid.	3.93	31%	33%	13%	9%	2%	11%
In the past week, I felt lonely.	3.90	38%	20%	20%	7%	4%	11%
In the past week, people were not nice to me.	3.90	31%	29%	18%	11%	0%	11%
In the past week, I felt worried.	3.20	27%	18%	9%	18%	18%	11%
In the past week, I felt like I didn't matter.	4.00	33%	29%	22%	2%	2%	11%
In the past week, I had trouble sleeping.	3.58	27%	22%	20%	16%	4%	11%
In the past week, I felt shy.	3.83	36%	18%	24%	7%	4%	11%
In the past week, I felt others didn't like me.	3.78	33%	20%	20%	13%	2%	11%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree).

Internalizing Behaviors
% Agree or Strongly Agree

|	
In the past week, I felt sad.	24%
In the past week, I felt afraid.	11%
In the past week, I felt lonely.	11%
In the past week, people were not nice to...	11%
In the past week, I felt worried.	36%
In the past week, I felt like I didn't matter.	4%
In the past week, I had trouble sleeping.	20%
In the past week, I felt shy.	11%
In the past week, I felt others didn't like me.	16%

Externalizing Behaviors

This scale measures the extent to which students report behaviors that are directed outward toward other people or property.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	No Response
Have you ever gotten in trouble in class?	4.55	64%	13%	9%	2%	0%	11%
Has your school called home because you were in trouble for your behavior?	4.84	82%	0%	7%	0%	0%	11%
Have you ever been in a fight?	4.74	76%	2%	9%	2%	0%	11%
Have you ever skipped schoolwork assignments?	4.08	44%	13%	18%	7%	2%	16%
Have you ever lied about something important?	4.32	51%	20%	16%	2%	0%	11%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Very Often) to 5 (Never).

Externalizing Behaviors
% Often or Very Often

|	
Have you ever gotten in trouble in class?	2%
Has your school called home because you were in trouble for your behavior?	0%
Have you ever been in a fight?	2%
Have you ever skipped schoolwork assignments?	9%
Have you ever lied about something important?	2%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%
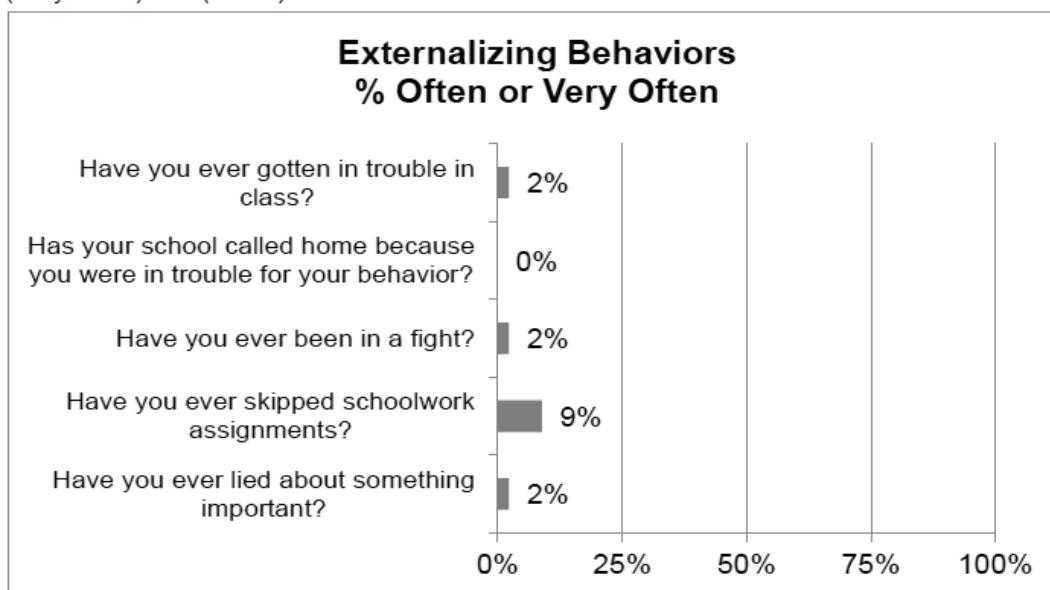
Bullying

This scale assesses the extent to whic students report engaging in or being victimized through interactions that they perceive as bullying.

	Item Mean	% Indicating Each Response Choice					
		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	No Response
Have you ever bullied someone at school?	4.88	82%	2%	4%	0%	0%	11%
Have you ever bullied someone while using the internet or instant messaging?	4.98	87%	2%	0%	0%	0%	11%
Have you ever been bullied at school?	4.50	64%	13%	7%	0%	4%	11%

**Item mean is the average response for an item across all respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree)

Bullying
% Often or Very Often

Have you ever bullied someone at school?	0%
Have you ever bullied someone while using the internet or instant messaging?	0%
Have you ever been bullied at school?	4%
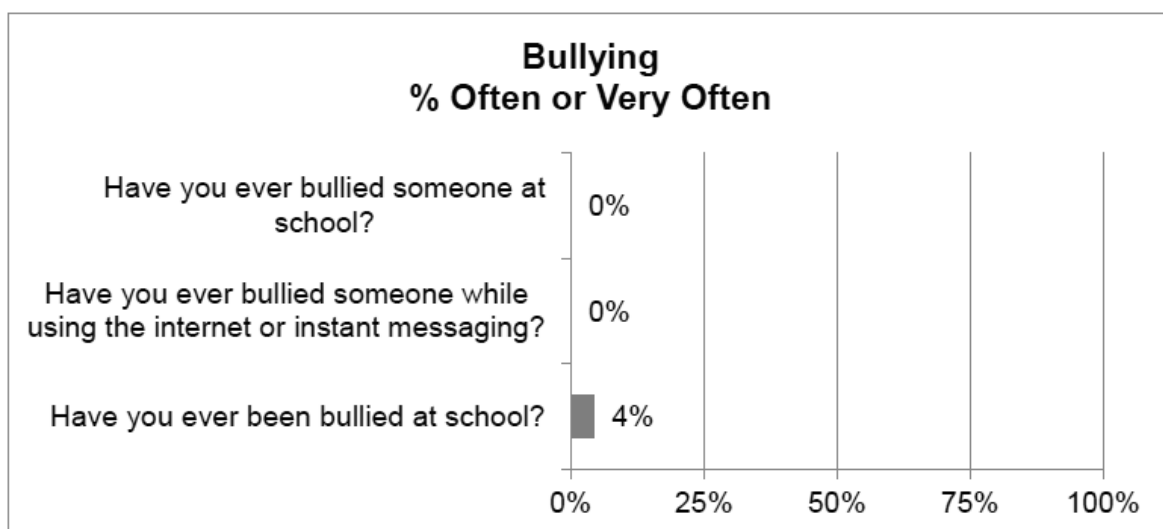
Note – The school district opted to remove the question related to alcohol and drug use.