

ABSTRACT OF CAPSTONE

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The Graduate School
Morehead State University

April 14, 2020

ROAD TO SUCCESS FOR AT-RISK NINTH-GRADE STUDENTS

Abstract of Capstone

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the
College of Education
At Morehead State University

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

Committee Chair: Dr. Michael W. Kessinger, Assistant Professor

Morehead, Kentucky

April 14, 2020

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ROAD TO SUCCESS FOR AT-RISK NINTH-GRADE STUDENTS

Tates Creek High School is a comprehensive high school located in Lexington, Kentucky that serves a diverse community. The dropout rate for the 2018-2019 school year was 2.7% and the graduation rate was 87.9%. The purpose of this study was to create a mentoring program for at-risk ninth grade students to provide extra supports, in addition to what was already in place, to increase students' academic performance, as well as improve students' behavior.

At-risk ninth grade students' preparedness for their high school tenure and the likelihood mentoring has on preventing students from dropping out of high school are examples of the benefits of mentoring. The ninth-grade year is a pivotal year for students and implementing interventions before students' academics and behavior declines allows at-risk students to begin the transformation to making better decisions about grades and behavior at the start of the school year.

Mentors serve many roles in the student's life. A one size fits all approach to mentoring is not as effective as tailoring the mentoring to meet individual student's needs. A mix methods study was conducted to determine if mentoring is beneficial for at-risk students.

KEYWORDS: mentor, ninth-grade, dropping out, retention, student supports

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DEDICATION

This capstone is dedicated to my family, specifically my mother, grandmother, and uncle who have always supported me, encouraged me, and continually push me to work hard and to never be satisfied with just being ok. They have loved me through the good and the bad.

To my sister and her family, your unwavering love and support means everything to me.

To my colleagues at Tates Creek High School who support me daily, accept my crazy, and trust me implicitly, this would not be possible without your support.

To my friends, who are like family, thank you for always being there and loving me. You have endured a lot through this process, and I would not have made it without your encouragement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the EdD Faculty at Morehead State University, specifically my Committee Chair, Dr. Michael Kessinger. Without your words of continuous wisdom, candid feedback, and overall support, this entire process would not have been possible.

Thank you, Dr. Privott, for serving as a committee member. Your insight is appreciated more than you know. I'm glad to have met you.

A special thank you to Dr. Peffer. Along with agreeing to serve as a committee member, you are the reason I decided to pursue my doctorate and apply for the program. You've been one of my biggest supporters over the years and you are appreciated more than you know.

I'll be forever grateful for my cohort members, my people, Martina and Sarah. I feel blessed to have formed true friendships with you both.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Ninth-grade is the most important year for a high school student. Ninth-grade is the foundational year that establishes the tone for students' high school tenure. When a student does not perform well as a freshman, it sets a negative foundation for the student's high school career and the student struggles to catch up. Many students who do not meet academic expectations freshman year and are retained do not ever get back on track (Weiss & Bearman, 2007). Unfortunately, for students who did not have a successful ninth grade year, it becomes very easy to not see the value in finishing high school.

Statement of the Problem

Dropping out of high school is an issue that continues to plague the educational system and our country. Even though many schools are working hard to meet students' needs on a more individualized basis, dropout rates have not decreased for extended periods of time. "It is well documented that one of the most critical issues facing the educational system in North America is the problem of students who leave school before they graduate from high school with a regular diploma" (Ricard & Pelletier, 2016, p. 32).

There are various reasons why students chose to dropout. The repercussions of the decision to dropout prior to graduating from high school and earning a diploma lasts a lifetime. For many at-risk students, non-academic barriers such as conflicts with other students, the student's home life, or lack of parental support directly

impacts the student's academic performance. Identifying ways to support at-risk students requires resources such as time, patience, and individualizing students' needs.

In order to address students dropping out of school prior to graduating, a school must take the time to identify contributing factors to students' poor performance. Poor performance then leads to students feeling disconnected from the school community. When schools create structures to monitor ninth grade performance and interventions before students are too far behind, the chance of helping the student change and see the benefits of school are very unlikely. The purpose of this capstone was to examine ways mentoring may serve as an intervention to prevent students from dropping out of high school prior to earning a high school diploma.

Significance of the Problem

Ninth-grade is a pivotal year for students and establishes the foundation for students' high school tenure. Many students arrive to high school ill-prepared for the transition. In high school, there is more freedom, more rigorous academic expectations, and the student to teacher ratio is 30+ to 1. Even with structures in place, many ninth-grade students struggle to meet expectations and academic benchmarks. At-risk ninth-grade students are even more likely to fall behind academically, behave inappropriately, or become truant (Weiss & Bearman, 2007).

Students who do not have a successful ninth-grade year fall behind and struggle for their remaining years of high school, if they remain to graduate. "The

early identification of students who are likely to drop out of high school and monitoring of these students throughout their educational represent critical factors” (Ricard & Pelletier, 2016, p. 32).

The successful completion of ninth grade means students have earned the required number of credits to have 10th grade status the following school year. In the 2019-2020 school year, a student at Tates Creek High School must earn six credits to transition to the next grade level each year. When a student earns six credits before the first day of the following school year, the student has successfully completed the ninth grade. There are students who struggle during the school year and will attend summer school to earn sufficient credits in order to successfully complete the ninth grade.

The ninth grade year is when a student can establish a pattern of behavior and academic performance for the remaining years of high school. For the students who successfully complete ninth grade and transition to 10th grade, their journey is not as difficult compared to ninth grade students who do not earn enough credits to transition to 10th grade. When a student fails to earn the necessary credits in ninth grade, the likelihood of the student catching up is difficult. In order to increase the number of students who successfully complete the ninth grade year, those ninth grade students who have been identified as at-risk need additional supports to help them be successful.

Background of the Problem

Students dropout of high school for various reasons. Disengagement from school, home life, or other non-academic factors make students think there is no other option. “Several theories have been advanced to explain why all students who dropout of school do so, including discussions of how school context interacts with students’ experiences to produce dropout behavior” (Stearns, Moller, Blau, & Potochnick, 2007, p. 211). There are common factors for why students choose to dropout of high school, but ultimately, each student has his/her own reason for not finishing high school.

The common factors for why a student chooses to dropout of high school were feeling disconnected from the school community, poor academic performance, and non-academic factors such as pregnancy and the desire to start working as soon as possible. Students who choose to dropout before earning a high school diploma do not always consider the ramifications of not completing high school and receiving a high school diploma.

When a student does not feel any connection to a school emotionally or is not performing well academically, it becomes more difficult to convince a student to remain and not dropout. “It is not surprising that retained students tend to have lower achievement scores, tend to be more pessimistic about their educational futures, and have more disciplinary problems” (Stearns et al., 2007, p. 220). It is difficult to keep a student interested in school when things are not going well. If the student, teacher,

or others has identified the student as a “bad” kid, teachers become frustrated and may not have as much patience with the student.

In 2015, Kentucky’s First Lady Jane Beshear rallied to change the dropout age law in Kentucky. Due to First Lady Beshear’s efforts, the dropout age increased from 16 to 18 and is known as the Graduate Kentucky Bill, formally known as Senate Bill 97. Beshear (2015) stated to *The Herald-Leader* reporter Jack Brammer, “We have worked with legislators and education leaders for more than seven years to promote the passage of the 'Graduate Kentucky' bill and are thrilled that statewide implementation of this long-overdue policy finally is at hand.”

Local Context

Tates Creek High School (TCHS) is a comprehensive high school in Lexington, Kentucky, and was part of Fayette County Public Schools District during the time of this study. The student enrollment for the 2019-2020 school year at Tates Creek High School was 1,753 (see Table 1). Of the enrollment, 10% of students received special education services, 12% of students were English Language Learners (ELL), and 52% of students were eligible for free or reduced priced lunches.

Table 1

Student Racial Demographics by Grade Level

	White		Black		Hispanic		Asian		Other	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
9	151	125	75	78	44	33	5	5	21	22
10	108	96	46	90	31	19	4	8	9	12
11	91	101	56	52	26	17	8	7	8	13
12	111	106	48	59	10	21	10	7	7	13
Total	461	428	225	279	111	90	27	27	45	60
	889		504		201		54		105	

For the 2019-2020 school year, the mission at TCHS was to prepare all Commodores for college and career success and for service as active and informed citizens with intercultural understanding and respect. The core values at TCHS was for all Commodores to be CREEK at all times: Connected, Responsible, Engaged, Exceptional, and Kind.

Students' needs and the TCHS's community's culture have positively changed in recent years with the implementation of the Freshman Academy. The 2017-2018 school year was the first year of the Freshman Academy at TCHS. Even with the implementation of the Freshman Academy, many ninth-grade students continue to struggle academically and behaviorally, but the extra supports began benefiting many students. The data improved and there were numerous reasons to celebrate.

For the 2015-2016 school year, two years before the implementation of the Freshman Academy, 167 out of 507 ninth grade students did not earn enough credits to identify as a 10th grader for the 2016-2017 school year. The 2015-2016 out of

school suspension monthly average for ninth grade students was over 300 days. For the 2018-2019 school year, the second year of the implementation of the Freshman Academy, the pass rate for ninth grade students improved. The number of students who failed and did not identify as a 10th grade student the following school year was reduced to 91 students out of 527 students. The out of school suspension average per month decreased to approximately 100 days.

Capstone Overview

This capstone was designed to examine how providing extra supports for ninth-grade students positively affected their high school experience, lessens the potential for dropping out, and increased engagement. Ninth-grade students typically struggle with the transition to high school from middle school, and without intentional structures were more inclined to become disengaged which potentially affects them academically, behaviorally, and they are less inclined to attend regularly. The results from the mentoring program reported in this capstone were used to determine the organization's next steps for moving forward to implement more specific, intentional supports for ninth-grade students at Tates Creek High School.

The implementation of this capstone derived from continued concerns with ninth grade students not performing well over the course of multiple years. When a ninth grade student does not earn the minimum number of credits to transition to 10th grade, the student is more likely to dropout. If a student does not reach the minimum dropout age, the student may stop attending school or is listless and unmotivated to

do anything. At TCHS, this had lead to an increase in inappropriate behavior and classroom disruptions.

The participants of this study were limited to Tates Creek High School staff members and a selective sampling of ninth-grade at-risk students. The students involved in the study do not know they were part of the study in order to protect their identities and for them to not feel singled out. These students were receiving the same supports that other ninth-grade students were receiving, except the sample group had more check-ins with various mentors and were being checked on weekly.

The relevancy of this information to the capstone was due to repeat ninth grade students' continued misbehaviors and continued poor academic performance. The repeat ninth grade students' continued misbehaviors inhibited the learning of other students. The repeat ninth graders continued poor academic performance kept the repeat ninth graders from progressing to higher grade levels. The more ninth graders who successfully complete the ninth grade, the fewer there were repeat ninth graders who were third- or fourth-year students in the building for the 2018-2019 school year.

The graduation rate for the 2018-2019 school year was 87.1% for TCHS. This indicated continued growth was necessary as the graduation rate was 83.9% for the 2017-2018 school year. Even though improvement was shown, implementing more structures for ninth grade students was the best place to start for the future. Providing earlier interventions for ninth grade students could positively impact the

students more. If at-risk ninth-grade students' experiences are more positive and productive, the likelihood students will dropout will decrease.

Research Questions

The following research questions served as the focus for the capstone:

1. How does providing mentoring for at-risk ninth-grade students improve students' academic performance during the transition to high school?
2. How does providing mentoring for at-risk ninth-grade students improve students' behavior during the transition to high school?
3. What were the perceptions of at-risk ninth-grade students regarding various aspects of mentoring provided to them during their freshman year experiences?

Hypotheses

The researcher hypothesizes the extra supports for the at-risk ninth grade students will benefit the students. It was not possible for the researcher to determine any specific projected data because each new freshman class presents its own successes and challenges. Students' needs change with each new class, but specific, extra supports will benefit the students academically, behaviorally, and in terms of the relationships at-risk students have with adults.

Various *t*-tests were conducted to examine the researcher's hypotheses. The null hypotheses based on the behavior referrals and semester pass rate of students were:

H₀1: There will be no statistical difference in the number of behavior referrals in the Fall 2019 semester for the at-risk students receiving mentoring services

compared to at-risk students from the same middle school who were not receiving mentoring services.

H₀₂: There will be no statistical difference in the number of courses failed in the Fall 2019 semester for the at-risk students receiving mentoring services compared to all other ninth-grade at-risk students who were not receiving mentoring services.

H₀₃: There will be no statistical difference in the number of behavior referrals for the at-risk students receiving mentoring services for Fall 2018 semester of their eighth-grade year compared to the referrals in the Fall 2019 semester.

The researcher's hypotheses were based on the researcher's experiences as a classroom teacher, assistant principal, and head principal. The researcher used the students' academic performance and behavior records to compare those at-risk students who were receiving the mentoring services versus those at-risk students who were not part of the mentoring program.

Definition of Terms

At-risk: A term used to describe a student who is in danger of failing academically or dropping out of school.

Check-in: An act committed by the mentor with the ninth-grade student being mentored. The check-in may involve, but is not limited to, a discussion about the student's grade, attendance, or behavior.

Mentors: Included the researcher as the building principal, ninth Grade Academy Principal, two Freshman Academy Counselors, four law enforcement officers, and five classroom teachers.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

A review of the literature indicates the transition from middle school to high school is difficult for students who are identified as at-risk. At-risk students' struggle to embrace and engage in school. The reason may be academically related or a non-academic issue that affects the student's education. Mentoring, retention, and different types of programs affect at-risk students tremendously.

Transitioning to High School

The transition from middle school to high school is difficult for many students, and if the transition is not smooth, a student's chances for a successful high school experience is lessened. "Young people who do not complete high school have a greater chance of becoming an emotional, social, and financial burden on the communities in which they live" (Sanders, 2008, p. 47).

The structural differences between middle school and high school can be difficult for many students to handle. Middle school students in Lexington, Kentucky, have a designated location to report to such as the gym when they arrive to school each morning. High school students are able to remain in the hallway, cafeteria, gym, or a teacher's classroom before school begins. Supervision for high school students lessens. High school students are not escorted to classrooms on the other side of the building or to lunch. High school students have a more difficult core curriculum with their English, math, social studies, and science courses. Students' academic records remain forever for high school students and are required for college

entrance, to join the military, or employment purposes. These structural differences are taken into consideration by some students, but for students who are struggling behaviorally or academically the transition to high school does not lend itself to success (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandria, 2002).. The term at-risk is used to describe youth from single-parent homes, and show signs of behavioral and/or emotional issues, and lack the necessary supports to be successful (Keating, et al., 2002).

“The importance of students’ eighth-grade achievement in their probability of advanced course-taking in high school also reinforces prior literature on the role that tracking plays in shaping students’ futures and dividing students by race and class” (Conger, Long, & Iatarola, 2009, p. 573). To better prepare students for the transition to high school, middle schools must address at-risk students’ social, emotional, and academic needs. Ninth-grade is the most prevalent starting point for high school students in the United States (Schwartz, Stiefel, Rubenstein, & Zabel, 2011) and a difficult transition from eighth-grade to ninth-grade has been associated with increased behavior problems (Smith, 2006). Eighth-grade students who struggle academically or behaviorally are not likely to make a positive change without assistance from an adult at the school-level.

Hormones, social turmoil, and academic preparedness causes anxiety for many students and parents. Mentoring can provide the necessary emotional structure students need to be more successful for the critical first-year of high school. Mentoring models vary depending on the vision of the person who creates the

program to the intended outcomes desired from implementing the mentoring program. Dawson (2014) discusses there were 15 mentoring definitions in 1991, and more than 50 definitions by 2007. Students' deficiencies should be identified by the end of the seventh-grade year and those students can be connected with a mentor to specifically address each student's needs.

The reasons vary why students become at-risk in middle school, but having a mentor who can serve as an additional support allows the students to begin addressing his/her own needs. An at-risk student who is provided a supportive environment at school has a greater chance of being more focused in class, which leads to teachers having the opportunity to provide quality instruction for students (Butts & Cruziero, 2005; Smith, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2011). "Mentoring represents a diversity of relationships across a variety of concerns" (Dawson, 2014, p. 144). The concerns vary depending on a student's life at home and can negatively impact his/her performance during the school day. A mentor may focus on grades or behavior, and as the mentor/mentee relationship evolves, the hope is for the student's performance to become more positive.

Grade Spans for Students

Schools' grade spans can have an effect on student performance. Schools serving grades K-8 are unique in allowing students to remain in the same school for elementary and middle grades (Schwartz et al., 2011) and allows for greater chances of remediation and structure. The remediation and structure allows students to have a lesser need for outside mentors because their needs are met through the established

relationships developed from attending the same school. Students' peer groups remain the same for a longer period of time and the stability strengthens students socially and emotionally. A student's emotional and social stability directly affects behavior, which correlates to academic performance, and attending school on a regular basis.

Engagement

Teachers are tasked with maintaining an engaging environment for their students. When a student is engaged, the student is actively listening and paying attention to the teacher's instructions. The student is participating and involved in the educational process. Engagement varies based on the teacher's style, but good teaching is good teaching and an outsider can visibly see when a classroom full of students are interested, and possibly intrigued, by a teacher's instructional practices.

Engagement also affects students' desire to attend school, behave appropriately, and achieve academically. A student engagement survey from 2006-2009 indicated 65% of students were bored at least once a day, with 16% reporting boredom in every class (Cooper, 2014). Disengagement from poor instructional methods and students not feeling wanted by one or more adults at school may cause a student to not want to be in school or have the desire to identify a need to be productive during the school day. A student who feels wanted and connected to school through a relationship with a peer or adult wants to attend school, if for no other reason than interaction with someone he/she feels comfortable. To prevent student disengagement and academic declines during middle school, interventions

need to be developed to promote school engagement and academic achievement (Woolley, Rose, Orthner, Akos, & Jones-Sanpei, 2013). Identifying why a student feels disengaged is a first step in helping the student make positive changes.

Hispanic, Black, and poor students appear to experience slightly higher increases in their high school graduation rates when they take rigorous courses by tenth-grade (Long, Conger, & Iatarola, 2012). Feeling a connection to school through mentoring can lead a struggling student to want to make the necessary changes to improve, but it does not happen overnight and the student has to see the benefits of the change. Each year, approximately 1.2 million students do not graduate from high school, more than half of whom are categorized in minority groups (Radcliffe & Bos, 2011). As students' needs continue to change the need to implement different types of interventions becomes necessary. Mentoring is an intervention designed to positively impact students in multiple ways.

Impact of Mentoring

The impact of mentoring differs depending on an individual student's needs; a student's personal and educational background establishes the foundation for how he/she performs in school. Healy and Welchert (1990) found it is necessary "to advance a definition of mentoring, derived from current thinking in developmental-contextual theory, that is both functional and comprehensive" (p. 17). Healy and Welchert consider mentoring to be a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in an environment between a mentor and a mentee with the goal of promoting development. Randomly assigning a student a mentor may not work; time and

thought has to be given to make sure the student's mentor is a good match and the mentor knows the focus of the mentor/mentee relationship.

A successful mentor program “points out that mutuality increases the likelihood of participant transformation, and it identifies participant maturation and context receptivity as factors that can increase the likelihood of successful mentoring” (Healy & Welchert, 1990, p. 21). Attending school is critical for students to remain able to progress academically and attendance monitoring should be a component of a mentoring model (Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Procedures and expectations have to be established and as the mentor/mentee relationship grows, it will develop into its own unique dynamic. Most importantly, the relationship cannot be forced; a student may have initial reluctance to participate, but if the hesitation continues, either the mentor is not a good match or the student is not ready to accept assistance.

Campbell-Whatley (2001) believes mentoring is a human relationship that includes encouraging and guiding personal growth and development, and “the goal of the relationship is to open the lines of communication and assist the student in developing competence and character” (p. 212). The process of mentoring takes time. A mentor should never expect for immediate or dramatic changes in attitude, attendance, or academic success; once the mentee feels comfortable, the mentee may begin to feel a connection and the desire to change. There is no specific time frame, but within the first few meetings, the mentor will know if the student wants to be involved. Many at-risk students begin to experience issues within the community as well, but when paired with someone who shows an interest in the student, changes in

behavior and attitude can become more evident. “Youth with mentors are 46% less likely to start using drugs, 27% less likely to start using alcohol, 33% less likely to commit acts of violence and 52% less likely to skip school” (Cutshall, 2001, p. 34).

Biggs, Musewe, and Harvey (2014) found the impact of adult mentoring on Black, under-resourced urban adolescents’ academic performance in middle grades were positively affected by mentoring, especially in reading. Many middle school students struggle with reading as a result of social promotion and behavioral issues the student engages in to detract attention away from not being able to read well. The importance of interaction between mentors and mentees within a formal program can lead to a deeper-level relationship that positively impacts students’ perceptions of school (Lankau, Riordan, & Thomas, 2005). Most students begin elementary school loving their teachers and wanting to please, and as students enter middle school, attitudes begin to change as a result of puberty. If the student does not have an adult in his/her life who sets behavioral and academic expectations and takes the time to provide assistance, the student may never grow academically.

Retention

Retaining students is not as common in middle school as in the past, but is normally seen as a school-level decision made by principals and teachers as a way to address students’ academic difficulties (Bali, Anagnostopoulos, & Roberts, 2005) and findings suggest student characteristics, district organizational features, and local politics all play a role in retention as well. Retention has been used as a method for

intervention for many students, but retention only further exacerbates the problem (Ferguson, Jimerson, & Dalton, 2001).

Retention is more successful in earlier grades, such as elementary school, than eighth-grade or high school. Retaining a student later in his/her educational career may negatively impact the student's academic achievement as well as the student's interactions with younger students. "Younger retained students score significantly higher than older retained students on readiness tests" (Ferguson et al., 2001, p. 335).

Realistically, a 15- or 16-year-old student is physically and emotionally more developed than a 12- or 13-year-old student and should not be in the same educational setting. Once a student has been retained in middle school, it is very difficult for the student to master the skills needed to be on grade on level. Most retained middle school students' behavior worsens and students struggle to improve academically. For males, grade retention appears to be centered on school detachment and poor academics while grade retention for females appears to be centered on pregnancy (Hickman & Wright, 2011).

Mentoring

Preparing teachers to work with students from diverse backgrounds will help better prepare teachers to deal with struggling students. Equipping teachers with the skills to address students' needs serves as a pre-intervention to mentoring. New York has established the Teaching Residents at Teachers College (TR@TC) Program where individuals seeking teacher certification in teaching English to speakers of other languages and teaching students with disabilities are paired with a mentor

teacher who serves as more than a supervising teacher (Sanchez, Roegman, & Goodwin, 2016).

TR@TC mentors are veteran educators who bridge the gap between pre-service teachers and schools. The mentoring the pre-service teachers receive broadens their perspectives and “increases their knowledge of how to teach” (Sanchez et al., 2016, p. 70). As students’ parents become younger and younger, the need for more structure at schools continues to increase. Teachers and parents must work together to establish a working relationship that serves in the best manner for the student. Teachers see students seven hours a day and need the skills to address non-related school issues, as well as academic deficiencies, in order to help at-risk students, succeed.

Mentoring is necessary for new teachers to provide them with skills to address students’ needs, especially at the middle school level. “New teachers are often overwhelmed by the demands of students, teams, curriculum, and middle school emotions, emotions, emotions” (Ramsay, 2000, p. 121). With student-led mentor programs, the mentors need advising from the teachers, and if the teachers are not prepared, the program is less-likely to succeed. When a new teacher is mentored by a veteran teacher, the new teacher is able to hone his/her skills in preparation for setting a positive example for students (Ramsay). Mentoring for teachers in diversity, classroom management, and curriculum positively impacts their ability to serve students well (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Teachers’ knowledge of students’ backgrounds and how to interact with varying students’ cultures allows teachers to

work with individual needs as opposed to a holistic approach, attempting a one-size fits all mentality.

Developmental mentoring is a structured approach to cross-age, school-based mentoring where high school students work with younger students (Karcher, 2005). Using a high-achieving, well-rounded 11th or 12th grade student as a mentor may be more effective because the younger student may be able to relate to the older student quicker than an adult. “In cross-age mentoring the focus is on the mentoring relationship, which is viewed as the main mechanism by which mentees’ develop in the areas of self-esteem, connectedness, identity, and academic attitudes” (Karcher, p. 65). The mentor’s participation is imperative in helping the mentee’s mindset change. The mentor must be committed to being present when scheduled; when adolescent mentors are inconsistent and not dependable, the impact has a negative effect on the mentee.

Dependability and reliability are two characteristics a cross-age mentor must possess, and the mentor has to make sure he/she has the time to devote to helping. Mentoring programs have the ability to support research suggesting “mentoring can promote mentees’ conventional connectedness, such as to school and parents” (Karcher, 2005, p. 73). When a mentee sees that his/her mentor is actively involved in school and performing well, the mentee may begin to develop a more positive attitude and feelings towards school.

If the mentor has a similar background to the mentee, the relationship is able to develop quicker and the mentee sees firsthand it’s possible to behave appropriately,

succeed academically, and attend school on a regular basis. The mentee has an opportunity to possibly see him/herself in the future through the mentor. Students who participate in cross-age peer mentoring programs report larger fall-to-spring gains in school-related connectedness and self-esteem than a comparison group of their peers (Karcher, 2009).

Mentoring programs do not always have to be large, time-consuming endeavors. At times, it is more productive to think smaller and refocus intervention attempts to help students improve. Too many times, schools attempt to create a program to address the needs of hundreds of students, but initially, it is best to start small and focus on one particular group or grade-level. Nisbett (2010) interviewed multiple teachers, who are making identifiable gains in closing achievement gaps, and found some of the most successful “teachers visit parents and children in their homes, insist on kindness and civility, and hand out rewards on the spot for good behavior and academic achievement” (p. 13).

One administrator helped build a math program for his feeder middle schools to help ensure students had mastered, or had begun to master, the most important concepts they needed to know for Algebra I. Interventions do not always have to cost money or be extensive in nature; thinking smaller and more intentionally can produce more effective results (Nisbett, 2010). As the program begins to sustain itself, schools can add components as needed based on their students’ needs. Currently, math and reading are the main focus for schools. If students are not strong in these two areas, it’s difficult for them to progress in other academic areas. When a student

is not strong in reading and math, it is best to identify which area the student needs the most help and begin the focus in that area.

The positive effects of mentoring are widely known, however, it is also important to examine the potential other side of mentoring. Mentors do not always enter into the relationship knowing the commitment or the effect their behavior has on the mentee. Kumar and Blake-Beard (2012) believe there are numerous reasons why researchers should delve deeper into understanding the negative side of mentoring. “The consequences of negative mentoring for the protégé can be far-reaching leading to personal damage” (Kumar & Blake-Beard, p. 80). When mentors are emotionally stable, focused, and set goals for themselves, they are able to regulate relationships in such a way as to prevent harmful effects of the mentoring process (Kumar & Blake-Beard).

An adult or student mentor who is not focused on helping the mentee is not a quality candidate to serve in this role. Individuals who become mentors to meet a community service requirement or because they think mentoring is easy are not viable candidates either. There is minimal research in the area of negative effects of poor mentor relationships, but it is important to recognize that poor mentor relationships can cause serious personal damage and can cause the protégé to become toxic (Kumar & Blake-Beard, 2002). A struggling student, paired with an ineffective mentor, can lead the mentee further away from making positive changes.

One of the benefits of mentoring is the impact it has on mentees remaining in school instead of dropping out. Once a student drops out of school, the student’s

chances of becoming employed lessens considerably. Only 37% of high school dropouts nationwide are steadily employed, and they are more than twice as likely to live in poverty (Radcliffe & Bos, 2011). One of a mentor's primary goals is to encourage the student to see the benefits of an education, and if the mentee/mentor relationship is not stable, dropping out can be an end result. In our current society, students who drop out find it difficult to find employment to sustain a lifestyle above poverty.

Successful Mentoring Programs

Middle school students do not always think about the repercussions of not performing well. Many do not realize the transition to high school is difficult, and the habits they develop in middle school are typically what they exhibit in high school. For instance, middle school math grades serve as a strong predictor for how a student will perform in a freshman math class (Schiller, 1999). Developing resilience in middle school “despite incredible hardships and the presence of several risk factors, there are some students who benefit from protective factors. Conditions in their lives, personal characteristics, and coping skills which enable them to succeed” (Reed, McMillan & Haskell-McBee, 1995, p. 3). Mentoring programs can provide the stability students need to overcome non-school related barriers and academic deficiencies. A mentor's assistance may help a struggling middle school student transition to making better decisions and establishing positive habits related to school.

Maine East High School, a large high school outside of Chicago, created a school-wide freshman advisory program where upper-class students served as the

mentors for the ninth-grade students (Lampert, 2005). Teachers served as advisors for the mentors and provided role-playing activities and lesson plans for the curriculum. The curriculum for the mentees focused on the students' connection to the school, academic achievement, and self-awareness (Lampert).

The goal of the advisory program at Maine East High School was to reduce the number of students who failed the ninth-grade year and increase the number of ninth-grade students who participated in school activities. The students' failure rate decreased from 37% in the 2002-2003 school year to 23% in the 2004-2005 school year, however, the school participation decreased too, from 72% in 2002-2003 to 64% in 2004-2005 (Lampert, 2005). Lee and Cramond (1999) found students who are mentored for more than one year have significantly greater aspirations. Mentoring programs for at-risk students is a process and ending the mentoring prematurely may lead students to revert back to previous negative habits.

Teaching students to become self-directed learners provides them with the necessary skills to help students take responsibility for their own learning. Providing students with choice to discover their interests generates motivation to get involved. "Immersing students in the school's culture and learning approach and using upperclassmen as models provides a powerful experience to incoming students" (Martinez & McGrath, 2013, p. 24). Teachers have to be able to step back and allow students to take the lead with their own educations.

Reflection is one of the most significant ways a student can begin to take control of his/her education. The teacher serves as the facilitator, but the students at

the Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, use reflection to identify how they can improve and areas where they continue to struggle (Martinez & McGrath, 2013). The reflections are available for the students to read and allows for them to comment on peers' reflections and learn from one another. Through reflection, a student is able to identify necessary changes to make better choices in the future.

Students' Roles

Students' life experiences affect their performance in school and a resiliency study in Virginia revealed there were no significant differences amongst student responses by race or gender, or by urban, suburban, or rural environments (Reed et al., 1995). Negative life experiences do not affect only students from particular ethnic groups or students based on their socioeconomic status. Students make the decision to perform better in terms of academics, behavior, or attendance, despite life's experiences, but the help of a mentor helps students make better choices.

Many middle school students make the decision to replace negative behaviors with positive behaviors when paired with a mentor who shows interest and encourages the student to make better decisions, especially during difficult times. "They believe control over their destinies comes from within, and this personal quality appears to be critical to their resiliency" (Reed et al., 1995, p. 7). When students learn to overcome barriers at an early age through the guidance of a mentor, they have the ability to learn coping strategies for the future instead of acting inappropriately or dropping out.

Students' Needs

The type of mentoring program most appropriate for a student depends on the student's needs. Community-based versus school-based mentoring programs (SBMP) can have different effects on students' experiences. SBMPs usually contain four characteristics: students are referred by school personnel; a mentor meets with the mentee one hour per week; mentors meet with the mentee during the school day on school property; and mentors and mentees engage in both academic and social activities (Gordon, Downey, & Bangert, 2013). For a student who is having difficulty meeting expectations in school, a SBMP is more beneficial. The student and mentor can focus on the student's school-related identified needs in an effort to help the student make better decisions and make positive changes. Change takes time and it is important to remember that a student who is struggling with behavior will have moments when he/she will digress. The SBMP should address how to support a student and help the student get back on track.

For a student who is struggling socially or emotionally outside of school, a community-based program is more appropriate. It is possible for students to have normal experiences in school and meet academic, behavioral, and attendance expectations, but struggle within the community. Community-based programs typically focus on both the student's experiences outside and inside school to ensure the student's needs are met. Thrive is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to "encourage healthy family development through community awareness, parent education, and support to children and families" (Gordon et al., 2013, p. 229).

In 1989, Thrive designed and implemented a SBMP that focused on collaboration, mentoring, parent engagement, professional development, and parent education. “This SBMP is part of a wraparound suite of strategies and services designed to work together to foster students’ healthy development and success” (Gordon et al., 2013, p. 230). When the community and school are able to work together, the student benefits greatly. Parents/guardians do not always have the resources, or know about resources, to help their struggling child. School can be intimidating for parents/guardians and a community-based mentor can help bridge the two together.

A quality SBMP addresses students’ needs related to reducing discipline infractions, improving attendance, self-confidence, academic engagement, and connectedness to the school. Connectedness is seen as “acts of giving back to, being involved with, and investing oneself in an effective manner in places and activities as well as in relationships with other people” (Gordon et al., 2013, p. 234). A quality SBMP helps to reduce school absences, teaches students behavioral strategies to minimize discipline referrals, and students have an increased connectedness to school (Gordon et al.).

In schools where a particular ethnic group is struggling behaviorally or academically, the school has to identify why this is taking place. In schools where African-American students are struggling, interventions are critical for lessening their negative experiences (Gordon, Iwanamoto, Ward, Potts, & Boyd, 2009). Identifying barriers for African-American middle school students is necessary when achievement

gaps are present or Black students are receiving a disproportionate number of discipline referrals compared to white students. If school staff members know their students' struggles and barriers, staff members are more likely to know what services are needed to help the students improve.

Students in Connecticut were chosen to participate in the Benjamin E. Mays Institute (BEMI) as an intervention based on their performance on the Connecticut Mastery Test. "The main goal of BEMI is to impact the intellectual, spiritual, physical, and social needs of the students served through role modeling and mentoring" (Gordon et al., 2009, p. 281). The BEMI included weekly parent meetings, an advisory board for guiding the program and providing support, and educational activities that took place off-campus. All activities were planned with the mentors, with the mentees in mind (Gordon et al.). Students who participated were found to have a greater academic improvement and were more focused academically. Mentoring for students does not have to take place during the school day or on school property. Exposure to the community can assist in helping the student make positive changes.

The Star Academy in Columbia, South Carolina, strived to provide structure for struggling students through innovative curriculum and instructional strategies different from what students were typically exposed to in school (Sanders, 2008). Thinking creatively and organizing a program that was different from what had always been done to help students gave the school a chance to meet students' needs. The Star Academy placed an emphasis on building students' application of problem-

solving skills through real-world challenges, frequent meetings with mentors to evaluate learning plans, appropriate technology use for learning and assessment activities, and engagement for families to involve them in the students' learning process (Sanders, 2008).

Eighth-grade students who were retained one or more times were the focus of the Star Academy's efforts to recover credits in order to rejoin their original grade-level peers. "The interactive, hands-on curriculum engages students and connects the relevance of each subject to everyday, practical situations" (Sanders, 2008, p 49). The retained students having an opportunity to return on grade level encouraged the students to do well and motivated them to keep working hard instead of dropping out.

Peer Mentors in SBMP

Using peers to serve as mentors is increasingly popular and effective. Nathan Frank's (2011) peer mentoring program at a suburban high school in Central Pennsylvania was established to help ease the transition for struggling ninth-grade students. Behavioral and academic data from the 2006-2007 school year revealed "ninth-graders received 43% of the discipline referrals at the school, and they served 40% of lunchtime detentions; academically, freshman accounted for 63% of the total classes failed during the first semester" (Frank, p. 66). Eleven teachers and counselors from Springs Grove and its feeder middle schools formed a freshman advocacy group in May 2007 and the main focus for the advocacy program was building relationships between the mentors and the mentees (Frank).

The middle school counselors identified 28 at-risk eighth-grade students who would need extra support transitioning to high school based on academic and behavioral data. The entire school community rallied behind the program; everyone had a role in ensuring the success of the new freshman class (Frank, 2011). The results of the program proved many at-risk students achieved academic success from their participation in the program, and the mentors learned “patience, empathy, and the ability to listen to students whose life stories are very different from their own” (Frank, p. 69). Peer mentoring benefits the mentees and allows student leaders to hone their communication skills while helping others.

Next Steps for Students

Students dropping out of school continues to be an issue when students do not feel connected nor find value in education. Common core data shows the highest rates of student dropouts occurs in large cities such as New York, Detroit, Baltimore, Chicago, and Philadelphia (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008). “In 2000, high school dropouts age 25 and older experienced a 6.4% unemployment rate, compared to 3.5% for those with a high school degree and 1.7% for those with 4-year college degrees” (Neild et al., p 54).

The need for a successful transition to high school is evermore necessary to decrease the probability of students dropping out. Mentors for at-risk students can help the student see the value in remaining in school; career and experience-based field trips can show students the value of not dropping out. Hearing directly from others working directly in a particular field gives students a chance to hear a different

perspective than from an adult at school or home. “The investment made by schools, particularly larger middle schools, to aid students in making a transition to high school is critical” (Smith, 1997, p. 150). Programs that target only one population such as students, parents, or staff members, might be considered wasted because they show no independent impact on improved student outcomes.

Successful Programs

Through empowering at-risk students, Capalongo-Bernadowski’s (2003) Buddy System Program explored eighth-grade students as mentors for kindergarten students. Assigning the middle school students as mentors forced them to improve their behavior, in order to participate, and the mentors were required to create a children’s book. The mentors, many who were also experiencing attendance and academic issues of their own, “created ABC books, while others wrote fiction. The variety was astonishing and the learning tremendous” (Capalongo-Bernadowski, p. 65). The middle school students became attached to their elementary mentees and were motivated to change their ways to continue participating.

An event that was planned for one-day, ended up transpiring into multiple meetings throughout the school year. The students who initially needed mentors of their own, became mentors for younger students and were able to learn more about literature and life at the same time (Capalongo-Bernadowski, 2003). The struggling students felt a connection to their roles as mentors and were determined to participate. This creative thinking was unconventional and involved students who normally are excluded from participating in events that take them from the classroom or school.

At-risk students who are identified with struggling academically or exhibiting negative behaviors have the potential to be ignored or mistreated due to their struggles. Campbell-Whatley (2001) developed a mentoring program for middle school students with learning and behavioral problems; “in addition to receiving specialized academics, each student was matched with a mentor who provided social and academic support” (p. 215). At the completion of the program, students who participated had improved attendance, higher grades, and fewer suspensions. Teachers and counselors disclosed students were motivated to learn, were more equipped to handle conflict, and exhibited a more positive attitude.

Mentors have the capacity to break down communication barriers with at-risk students (Campbell-Whatley, 2001). The most important aspect of mentoring is making sure the mentee and mentor are able to connect to help the mentee make better decisions. At-risk students are used to being classified in a negative manner, and when an at-risk student is placed with a mentor and begins forming a healthy bond with the mentor, the mentee is more likely to want to begin making positive changes.

Ninth-Grade Transition

The transition from middle school to high school can be difficult for students. The change in structure, academic expectations, and social differences affects students in different ways. Ninth-grade students are at significant risk during the transition to high school, especially those students from impoverished homes; these students experience more stress that makes it challenging to focus and see the benefits

of academic success (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009). Greater engagement and immersion in school in eighth-grade decreases the odds of dropping out once students enter high school (Pearson & Banerji, 1993; Neild et al., 2008; McIntosh & White, 2006).

Eighth-grade is a pivotal time in a student's life and is the basic foundation for high school; students and families begin anticipating the change and are not always properly equipped, especially for those students who struggled in middle school. "In this era of increased interest in experimenting with nontraditional school structures, perhaps students should have more options to remain in the same school from K-12 or to attend small, flexibly operated schools where 'being known' is taken for granted" (Neild et al., 2008, p. 560).

Many schools across the United States have implemented smaller learning communities (SLCs) to address the transition concern for students. SLCs are designed to help teachers know and work with each other, students, and families to increase the focus of the educational process on students (Levine, 2010). The presence of a SLC brings teachers together from different subject areas to a team concept and they share a group of students.

Proactively addressing students' developmental needs before they transition from middle to high school leads to positive results. As students mature, their needs change, and when their needs are not met from parents/guardians, the responsibility falls on the school. According to Cauley and Jovanovich (2006), teachers and administrators have to be intentional about addressing at-risk students earlier:

More students fail ninth-grade than other grade of school, poor and minority students are twice as likely as others to be retained, and among fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds who struggle with basic reading and mathematics skills, 20 percent drop out of school within two years. (p. 15)

High school is a time for students to become more independent as they begin to become less dependent on the adults in their lives, and their search for their own identify leads to exploration. High school students having to learn to adjust to class changes, maneuvering a larger building, and remembering their locker combinations are concerns expressed by many students and parents (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Smith, 2006). Identifying ways to ease the transition for students leads to the students feeling more comfortable when arriving to ninth-grade. Feeder middle schools and high schools can target activities for incoming ninth-graders that are comprehensive and allows students to experience the high school before the first day of ninth-grade. “A needs assessment should be conducted to determine the particular concerns of the transitioning students and their academic needs” (Cauley & Jovanovich, p. 19).

Effective transition programs improve attendance, achievement, and retention. At-risk middle school students should visit the new school prior to the first day to meet administration, teachers, and see how the new school functions. Visiting the new school during the school day is best practice to allow the students to see transition times, how the cafeteria works, and hear from current students about the differences in middle school and high school. Current upper-class students’

testimonials about what they wish they had known prior to transitioning to high school gives the students a first person account for what is ahead.

Many schools across the US with high-poverty and high-minority populations are thriving, and there is an untrue myth that only high performing schools are those with very low free and reduced lunch populations. A student's socioeconomic status does not determine the student's academic ability. Chenoweth (2010) discovered the following observations can make any school successful: it takes everyone to run the school; expect that all students will meet or exceed standards; be relentlessly respectful and respectfully relentless; student achievement data guides decisions; and do whatever it take to make sure students learn.

Transformation begins with the leaders of the school because "school leaders must be guardians of their students' future, not of their staff members' happiness" (Chenoweth, 2010, p. 19). Easing the transition for ninth-grade students may cause frustration for adults when structures have to be modified to meet students' needs. Schools have to meet at-risk students where the students are and take the appropriate measures for students to progress where they need to be academically and behaviorally.

Ninth-grade students often do not understand they must earn credits to progress from grade to grade in high school in order to graduate, and by the time they realize it, many opportunities for credit recovery have passed. "The majority of ninth-graders at nonselective urban high schools enter with academic skills several years below grade level" (Neild et al., 2008, p. 547). Schools have to know their own

deficiencies to make changes that will positively impact students. Overcrowded classrooms, insufficient textbooks, schedule changes, and teacher retention are issues schools face exacerbating student performance (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Neild et al.).

Eighth-grade students in a Philadelphia urban school district were profiled to examine their attitudes and behaviors, as well as their academic and social engagement, to gain a better understanding of their beliefs related to the aforementioned topics. Approximately 60% of the students dropped out of high school by their third or fourth year, since the legal drop out age in Philadelphia is 17 years old. Many of these students were classified as ninth- or tenth-grade students, even though they had been enrolled in high school for three or four years (Neild et al., 2008).

School-level mentoring programs for at-risk students helps alleviate the chance students will get lost in a large high school setting. The opportunities to skip class and fall behind academically are much greater due to the number of students compared to faculty. Levine (2010) found when schools implemented SLCs, the results were higher attendance rates, which led to higher graduation rates. Students have to be present to learn and by having a core group of teachers for groups of students, attendance issues are easier to catch much sooner.

The fewer the educational transitions students experience, the better they perform. The stability of attending one school for a period of time helps students establish routines and students and adults have a stronger chance of knowing one

another. “Students enrolled in school districts where they attended a K-8 school and then transitioned into a 9-12 environment consistently outperformed students from similar demographic backgrounds who attended a distinct middle school” (Smith, Akos, Lim, & Wiley, 2008, p. 33). “Feeder patterns are shaped by the districts’ school-assignment policies and students’ propensities to deviate from the established patterns” (Schiller, 1999, p. 218). When districts do not make decisions based on what is best for students, the ending result can lead students to not feel a connection to school or care about academics.

Smith et al. (2008) examined a group of students’ perceptions before and after the transition to high school, and the students’ expectations regarding ninth-grade. Many schools have created a stand-alone ninth-grade school for freshman, or sequestered freshman to one part of the building to help ease the transition, however, there is research to support creating this type of environment prolongs the true high school experience.

Research indicates this is an effective intervention to help put structures in place to help students succeed. The importance for middle schools to better prepare students for the rigor of high school is evermore present. In order to make the transition less stressful for students, eighth-grade and ninth-grade teachers must be on the same page with the academic, social, and organizational school concerns (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). When middle schools and high schools work together, the transition for at-risk students is much easier.

Many at-risk ninth-grade students do not have a realistic conception of high school. “Prior to ninth-grade, students were concerned about course difficulty and organizational issues such as getting lost. They looked forward to increased independence in choosing courses and developing an academic plan” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 39). When high schools and feeder middle schools work together to identify the distinct differences between middle and high school academic expectations, social opportunities, and organizational procedures at-risk students are less-likely to fall deeper behind.

Creating a peer mentoring program for at-risk students puts a structure in place immediately for students who have a history of struggling academically, behaviorally, or with attendance. When ninth-grade students feel a connection to the new school, they are more accepting to making good decisions. The culture of the building plays a role in this process, too; student performance and teachers are the core component to easing the transition from middle to high school (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). Students are aware when the school they are enrolled in has expectations for academics, behavior, and attendance. Many schools’ organizational structures have not changed in many decades and the lack of progression to meet students’ growing needs negatively impacts many students when they enter high school.

Milner (2003) believes teachers are not taught to be reflective in a deeper manner. “P-12 classroom teachers have been taught to generally deliberate upon their practices in order to effect change, but reflection on diversity is seldom taught or

practiced” (Milner, p. 173). Milner is adamant that students, especially students of color, are not the problem; teachers’ perceptions and preconceived notions about students’ backgrounds and students’ current situations are the problem. Teachers have to use information about a student’s past to help create a safe, welcoming environment and be reflective of their own methods to meet individual students’ needs.

Conclusion

The eighth-grade year for students is a critical time, and profoundly effects students’ success in high school.

The influence of a broader number of peers (both positive and negative), the potential of developing bad habits such as skipping class, and entry into larger, sometimes seemingly less caring environments can all impact how students react. The ninth-grade year is critical to students’ success in high school. (Christie, 2008, p. 157)

The anxiety associated with exiting the safety net of eighth-grade can cause many students to slip further between the cracks if they’re already at-risk. At one point in time, retention of low-performing students was how at-risk students were addressed as a way to combat them progressing unprepared, but that does not solve the problem (Bali et al., 2005). Schools have to be willing to work collaboratively to ease the transition and the sooner structures are put into place before students’ transition to high school, the better prepared students are when entering high school. The need for interventions to better prepare students for high school are evident and

effective mentoring programs demonstrate at-risk students have a more likely chance of making positive transformations if they have a positive influence to assist in the process.

At-risk students should be identified prior to ninth-grade to put structures in place to help their transition and help them be successful. The effectiveness of principals in the areas of staffing, curriculum, and course selection are significant to student performance (Bloom & Owens, 2011). Structures such as mentoring should be at the forefront of an administrator's mind when making plans for a new ninth-grade class. Mentors can provide advice and direction for new students to help them make wise decisions in their new setting. For at-risk students, who are prone to negativity due to academic, behavior, or attendance issues in the past, the newness of ninth-grade may be the fresh start necessary to facilitate change.

Chapter 3

Methodology/Procedures

Students dropping out of high school prior to earning a high school diploma continues to plague our nation. Many at-risk students who transition to high school from middle school receive minimal, if any, additional support to help them be successful in high school. Dropout prevention for at-risk students is imperative. Students who are prone to not succeeding academically are more likely to struggle with the transition to high school.

TCHS's demographics have changed substantially over the past 18 years. The percentage of students who receive free/reduced services has increased from 17% in the 2002-2003 school year to 54% in the 2019-2020 school year. The increase in free/reduced services was a result of the closing of a housing project on the north side of town. The residents from that community were moved to other rental properties on the south side of town in the Tates Creek district. The properties had been rental properties for young professionals and families, and the local housing authority purchased the properties and converted them to subsidized housing.

For the 2019-2020 school year, the Ninth Grade Academy was a structure in place for all ninth grade students. There were three cadres in the Ninth Grade Academy and each cadre had its own team of teachers. Each cadre was assigned an English, math, social studies, and science teacher, and the other four teachers were a mix of different elective teachers such as Health/PE, Career and Technical Education, World Languages, and Fine Arts/Humanities.

Each cadre met weekly for a smaller learning community (SLC) meeting to review students' grades, attendance, and behavior. The SLC also planned events related to the culture of the academy and ways to keep students engaged and feel a connection to the school. The cadres planned individual cadre events and events together for the entire ninth grade class.

Research Questions

The following research questions served as the focus for the capstone:

1. How does providing mentoring for at-risk ninth-grade students improve students' academic performance during the transition to high school?
2. How does providing mentoring for at-risk ninth-grade students improve students' behavior during the transition to high school?
3. What were the perceptions of at-risk ninth grade students regarding various aspects of mentoring provided to them during their freshman year experiences?

Hypotheses

Three null hypotheses were developed, and they related to the extra supports provided in this study for the at-risk ninth grade students. The hypotheses were based on the researcher's experiences as a classroom teacher, assistant principal, and head principal. The researcher used the students' academic performance and behavior to compare those at-risk students who were receiving the mentoring services versus those at-risk students who were not part of the mentoring program. The null hypotheses for this capstone were:

H₀1: There will be no statistical difference in the number of behavior referrals in the Fall 2019 semester for the at-risk students receiving mentoring services compared to at-risk students from the same middle school who were not receiving mentoring services.

H₀2: There will be no statistical difference in the number of courses failed in the Fall 2019 semester for the at-risk students receiving mentoring services compared to all other ninth grade at-risk students who were not receiving mentoring services.

H₀3: There will be no statistical difference in the number of behavior referrals for the at-risk students receiving mentoring services for Fall 2018 semester as an eighth-grade student compared to the referrals in the Fall 2019 semester.

Research Design

The research design for this capstone was mixed methods. Quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were used to identify if the additional mentoring and supportive structures put into place with the mentoring model were helping the students be more successful. For any student who was not making positive gains academically and/or behaviorally, additional steps were taken to identify ways to meet the student's needs.

Surveys, observations, and individual interviews were used to obtain qualitative data collection. Students' grades and the number of discipline referrals a student accumulated during the Fall semester were collected for quantitative analysis. The purpose was to identify any trends that could lead to discussions about the reasons students were not performing well with the additional supports in place. The

mentoring model was not a one size fits all approach. Each individual student had needs specific to him or her. The mentoring the student received was designed for the student as an individual.

Subjects and Sampling. The enrollment at TCHS for the 2019-2020 school year was 1,753 students of which 559 were ninth graders. Of these students, there were 263 female and 296 male students. There were 282 students who were eligible for free/reduced lunch services and 79 students were required to attend summer school to be promoted to ninth grade. (see Table 2)

Table 2

Tates Creek High School Student Enrollment

Grade	Males	Females	Total
9	296	263	559
10	198	225	423
11	189	190	379
12	186	206	392
Total	869	884	1753

Of the total enrollment, 183 students (10.4%) were identified for special education services with 57 (3.2%) being freshman. There were 133 students (7.5%) school-wide who have a 504 Plan and 53 (3%) were freshman. There were 202 (11.5%) students school-wide who were identified as English Language Learners (ELL) and 49 (2.7%) were freshman. (Table 3)

Table 3

Tates Creek High School Student Services

	School-Wide	ninth Grade
Regular Education	1235	400
Special Education	183	57
504 Plans	133	53
ELL	202	49
Free/Reduced Lunch	917	282

The 25 students who participated in the mentoring program were a selective sampling of students from one of the 11 middle schools in Lexington, Kentucky, all part of the Fayette County Public Schools District. All the students who were part of the sample group were first-year ninth grade students and had been required to attend summer school prior to being promoted to the high school as a ninth-grade student.

Instrumentation. Qualitative data were collected through surveys, individual interviews with students and classroom teachers, and observations. Students' grades and behavior discipline referrals were obtained for quantitative analyses.

Quantitative data collection. Infinite Campus (IC), the system used for maintaining students' records such as teachers' gradebooks, attendance, and enrollment information was the tool used to retrieve the quantitative data. All students' information and records were available from IC. Access rights to students' information is determined based on the faculty member's job classification.

Student progress was obtained three times during the fall semester. The first progress report was obtained in September 2019 with the second progress report being collected in November 2019. The third report reflected the cumulative semester grade. Both the numerical percentage and letter grades were collected to gauge progress throughout the semester. The final semester grade was to identify if the student was successful. A passing score, D or above, was considered success.

The students' discipline records for two consecutive fall semesters served as additional quantitative data. A comparison was made between the students' behavior data from the fall of 8th grade year in 2018 to the fall of the student's current ninth grade year in 2019.

Students receive behavior referrals for a wide-range of misbehaviors such as skipping class, tardy to school, tardy to class, fighting, profanity, and verbal abuse to identify the most common. According to the 2019-2020 Fayette County Public Schools' Code of Conduct Student Guide, the behavior infractions were classified by a four-tier violation system:

- Class I Violations: A Class I violation included relatively minor misconduct that rarely, if ever, has the potential to result in consequences outside of the district (p. 15).
- Class II Violations: A Class II violation included relatively moderate misconduct that occasionally has the potential to result in consequences outside of the district (p.17).

- Class III Violations: A Class II violation included relatively major misconduct that often has the potential to result in consequences outside of the district (p. 19).
- Class IV Violations: A Class II violation included relatively extreme misconduct that virtually always has the potential to result in consequences outside of the district (p. 25).

The type of violation determines the in-school consequence the student is issued from an Administrator. A Class I violation typically does not result in an out of school suspension, but a Class IV violation almost always results in an out of school suspension.

Qualitative data collection. At the beginning of the school year, the mentor met with each student individually to ask the question, “What do you need help with in order to be successful this school year?” The questions were vetted by ninth-grade teachers. Each student was asked the same question and follow up questions, if asked, were based on the individual student. Examples of follow-up questions were, but not limited to:

- How do you know when you are getting angry?
- What is one thing that helps you stay calm and/or focused during class?
- Does your family get upset with you when you get in trouble at school?
- Does your family get upset with the school when you get in trouble at school?

- What do you like most about school?
- How could school be more interesting for you?

A survey was administered twice to collect additional qualitative data. Once, at mid-semester, in October 2019 and again after the fall semester ended and the students returned from Winter Break in January 2020. The surveys were anonymous. Anonymity was necessary to garner honest responses. The mentor was concerned with the students' true candid responses if the students put a name on the survey or if the questions were asked in an interview setting.

The survey questions focused on the student as an individual and the student choose one response per question. The response options were "Yes", "No", or "Sometimes/Maybe/Often." The mentor waited until October to administer the survey the first time in order to give the students time to acclimate to the transition. The same survey was administered approximately two months later to identify if the students' answers had changed. Even though the results were anonymous, the responses to the survey questions were relevant:

- Do you like high school more than middle school?
- How do you feel the semester is going?
- Do you feel the extra support of a mentor is helping you succeed in the ninth grade?
- Does the mentoring motivate you to work harder to pass all your classes?
- Mentoring has helped me start ninth grade positively.

- Knowing someone is monitoring my grades and behavior motivates me to do better.
- Has mentoring helped make the transition to high school easier?
- I'm going to pass ninth grade and will be a 10th grader next year.
- There's at least one adult at school who cares about me.
- I want to graduate from high school.

The interview questions and observations served as additional qualitative data.

The mentor took notes to document the students' behaviors while in class. The mentor also documented information pertaining to each individual student.

Information that could be used to tailor the student's mentoring to meet his/her individualized needs.

The students' teachers were interviewed throughout the semester as a means of monitoring the students during instructional times and transition times. The data collected was used as an additional way to provide supports for the students in a more individualized manner. Many of the students were enrolled in the same classes with the same teachers. The mentor communicated to the teachers the students' needs in order to help the teachers make better connections with the at-risk students. This helped the teachers know students' needs they would not have known if the student was not being mentored.

Procedures

There were 39 students from one Fayette County middle school who were required to attend summer school to be promoted to ninth-grade. Of the 39 students, 25 were randomly selected to participate in this study. The 25 students' parents/guardians were contacted by the researcher while the students were enrolled in summer school and the researcher discussed the mentoring program and its purpose. The students' parents/guardians were notified the purpose of the additional supports, in addition to the structures already in place for ninth-grade students, were to help students pass ninth grade without having to attend summer school. There were four parents who did not want their child to participate so four additional students were randomly selected from the remaining 10 students.

Initial Meetings. Once the 25 students were selected and their parents/guardians had granted permission, the researcher met with each student individually to discuss the potential mentoring services the students would receive. The researcher explained to the students their individualized needs would be addressed. The researcher explained to the students since they had attended summer school to be promoted to high school, they were identified as needing additional supports to remain on track as ninth graders. If the student struggled with behavior, the focus was on behavior. If the student struggled with organization, the focus was on providing organization methods that would work for the student. The researcher wanted to ensure the students knew the reason he/she had been assigned a mentor.

The researcher took this time to talk to the students about his background as a classroom teacher and administrator. This led the students to feeling more comfortable discussing themselves and their pasts and the present. The researcher also made an effort to seek information about what each student's plan in the future for after high school.

During Camp Commodore, the ninth-grade orientation meeting, small group sessions were created for all the students. The students in the mentor group were intentionally placed in the same group to provide the mentor an opportunity to communicate the same information to all the students together. Since all other ninth graders in attendance were attending a similar session, the sample group was not singled out nor did they feel suspicious about the session.

During this session, intentional discussions took place about the importance of the ninth grade year. Both ninth-grade counselors were present as well as the ninth-grade principal. The main objective was to connect with the students prior to the first day of school. The transition to high school can be difficult and it was important for all students, especially those identified as at-risk, to feel comfortable and know resources were available for support.

Services. The students involved in the mentoring program received the same primary services and interventions that all ninth-grade students received who were in the Freshman Academy. The students in the mentor program had weekly interaction with an adult related to the student's need. A conversation or observation that was initially a check-in, could possibly lead to the mentor discovering a need for the

student. The mentor's check-in with a student was an opportunity for the mentor to help remove any barriers the student was facing, academic or non-academic.

The mentor and student's weekly meeting consisted of a dialogue about the student's current needs. The mentor reviewed the student's grades, attendance, and behavior with the student. The mentoring services were individualized to meet each student's needs. One week, a student may meet with the counselor as part of the mentoring program to review grades and construct a plan for improvement in a class the student was failing.

The next week, the same student may have met with one of the campus law enforcement officers to discuss the student's involvement in a verbal altercation earlier that week. The purpose of the mentor session was to identify productive ways to reach a resolution. The officer decided the best way to proceed was to host a mediation with the student who was being mentored and the other student who was involved in the altercation for conflict resolution.

Even though the altercation was only verbal and not physical, the altercation did cause a minor disturbance. A minor disturbance could result in a Class I or Class II consequence and since peer conflicts can escalate quickly, the mentor's guidance may help keep the student from verbalizing any offensive language or attempts to become physically violent. The mentors were also tasked with helping the students practice reflection and patience.

After the first two weeks of school, the mentor began observing the students in class. The purpose of the mentor's observations was to observe the students'

interactions with peers, interaction with the teacher, and if the students were on task. On task means the student was working or attentive during the teacher's instruction. The students did not know the mentor was observing them. The mentor regularly conducted daily walk-throughs and it was common to see the mentor in classrooms. The mentor typically visits 3-5 classrooms per day, therefore, the students did not think they were being observed.

The detailed grade reviews allowed the researcher an opportunity to speak with each student one-on-one about the student's grades and progress. If a student was performing well, or meeting expectations by maintaining a passing grade, the mentor encouraged the student to continue meeting expectations. The mentor also encouraged the student to make an attempt to perform better in order to increase the grade more. If a student was not meeting academic expectations and was failing a class, the mentor would review missing assignments or poor performance on a specific assignment, or multiple assessments, to establish a plan for improvement.

When a student was struggling with a specific class or content, the mentor coached the student on his/her next steps. The student was encouraged to speak with his/her teacher to ask, "Can you give me some advice for how I can improve my grade in your class?" The mentor's goal was to teach the students how to verbally communicate with teachers using an appropriate tone and a specific question that would facilitate honest feedback. The students involved in the mentoring program were used to not completing assignments on time or at all. The transition to high

school was difficult at first because many teachers do not allow students to submit work late.

The surveys, observations, and interim progress reports served as formative data that were used for goal setting and tracking student progress. Monitoring data throughout the semester allowed the mentor to conduct needs assessments for each student and make adjustments for how to serve the student throughout the semester.

Surveys. The initial survey helped the mentor establish a baseline for each student's needs. Some students' focus was behavior or self-control. Some students' focus was academic and work completion. Knowing this information in the beginning allowed the mentor to match the student with other mentors who helped guide the student in the area(s) the student needed growth.

The mid-year survey provided the mentor with feedback for additional ways the mentor could continue providing assistance to the students. Too many times, when a student makes progress in an area, the focus changes. With this mentoring program, the students' focus may change, but the mentors put in place to provide supports were not lessened. The additional supports and extra attention were components of the mentoring the students stated helped get them on track. The students may not have always liked the attentiveness of the mentors, but the students were honest regarding the mentors' check-ins, asking questions, and expectations for the students when it came to behavior and academics.

The end of the semester survey was to help the mentor evaluate the effectiveness of the mentor program. The mentor needed data to support the mentors'

efforts and the students' honest responses mimic their end of the semester grades and semester behavior reports. The end of the semester survey was used for additional information about what aspects worked well and what aspects needed adjusting in order to improve students' experiences with their mentor.

Observations. Classroom observations allowed the mentor to see the students in an instructional academic setting. If a student was not performing well in a class, the mentor would observe the student in the class and then provide the student with suggestions for how to improve. When the issue was academic in nature, the mentor would work with the student to obtain additional help. The additional help ranged from an in-class peer mentor, after school tutoring, or a conversation with the teacher.

The mentor's goal was to serve as a support for the at-risk student, not to enable non-productive, inappropriate behavior, or bad habits. Interviews with classroom teachers were used to gauge if students involved in the mentoring program were more engaged and focused than other at-risk students not in the program. The classroom teachers' feedback was instrumental in establishing patterns for many of the students. The students discovered the classroom teachers and the mentor were communicating due to the follow-up conversations the mentor was having with students. The conversations were very specific in nature.

Goal Setting. After the first six-week grading period, the student, mentor, and student's guidance counselor met to develop goals for the next six-weeks based on the student's academic or behavior needs. Non-academic factors such as behavior

may be a factor as to why the student was not performing well academically. The students' progress report grades served as a source of data. These quantitative data established the baseline for the students' academic progress since it was the first academic report for the semester.

After the second six-week progress reporting period, the student, mentor, and the student's guidance counselor met again to discuss the student's progress. The progress discussed was the student's most-recent grades, the student's progression to meeting the goals that were set at the end of the first six-week grading period, and the new goals the student planned to attempt or if the student was still focusing on the original goals.

At the end of the fall semester, the students participated in individual interviews about the first semester of high school. The mentor and each student reviewed the student's letter grades and behavior report from the first semester and this discussion was used to set goals for the 2nd semester. The students' final semester letter grades were used as a measure to determine the effectiveness mentoring has on at-risk ninth grade students.

Data Analysis

The researcher hypothesized that extra supports for at-risk ninth grade students would benefit the students. The hypotheses were tested through quantitative and qualitative data collection.

Quantitative data such as the students' letter grades and behavior referrals, as well as qualitative data such as survey results and individual interviews, were

monitored throughout the semester to track the students' progress. The mentor used the students' fall final semester grades and fall semester behavior records to make final determinations about student progress.

Quantitative data. The students' letter grades helped to determine how many classes each student passed for the semester. The interim progress reports were used to track the students' progress throughout the fall semester. Academic performance of students was obtained from grades submitted by the classroom teacher in Infinite Campus. The final semester grades were used to calculate the number of classes passed for all ninth-grade students. The data were organized by (1) the 25 students receiving mentoring services; (2) the 14 students from the same middle school, and (3) the remaining ninth-grade students who were considered at-risk as well.

The students' behavior was monitored by the mentor on a daily basis through various means. The mentor was notified via email any time a discipline referral was processed for a student. The Freshman Academy Principal was aware of which students were involved in the mentoring program and would provide the mentor with specific details about any behavior concerns. The mentor would review the discipline referral and discuss the contents of what was reported with the student. After the student reported to the mentor his/her side of the story, the mentor would always ask, "What is one thing you would do differently if this situation were to happen again?"

Teaching the students who were involved in the mentoring program the value of reflection was a very important aspect of the data analysis. Students were not able

to grow emotionally, mentally, or socially if they did not accept responsibility for their role in a concern or misbehavior itself. Self-assessment and self-control became regular components of the mentoring program. As the mentors gained the trust of the students over the course of the semester, the students began to realize how they were more intentional about behaving properly. The majority of the students in the mentor program had a desire to behave appropriately. The desire to behave better was a result of an increase in self-respect and the students not wanting the mentor to become aware any of behavior issues. The students were intrinsically motivated to do better.

Three *t*-tests were used to analyze the academic and behavioral data. The comparisons were completed for the 25 students involved in the study to the 14 students who were not receiving mentoring and attended the same middle school. Other comparisons were between the 25 students involved in the study to the remaining 54 ninth-grade students not involved in the mentoring but were considered at-risk because they attended summer school to transition to ninth grade. Finally, a number of referrals for the students in the mentoring program were collected both for the Fall 2018 semester and for the Fall 2019 semester. This allowed for a comparison of referrals during a similar time frame as an eighth-grader and ninth-grader. The purpose of the *t*-tests was to determine if there was a significant difference in courses failed and behavioral referrals for the different groups.

Qualitative data. Qualitatively, the individual interview results were analyzed to identify common themes based on the students' responses. The themes

were coded manually and were the basis for the six categories: Do Not Know/Do Need Help; Make Better Decisions; Not Getting Involved in Drama; Attendance; Self-Control/Remaining Focused; Submitting Assignments. The categories were a result of the students' explaining to the mentor what each student needed to be successful.

This information allowed the researcher to begin to establish each individual student's needs and to make plans for appropriate mentors for each student. A student who needed assistance with submitting assignments would not need to see the mental health counselor. This student needs to be matched with a classroom teacher or the student's guidance counselor who can focus on strategies to help the student become more organized.

The mid-semester and end of the year results were used as guides for whether or not the mentoring was beneficial from the students' perspectives. It was not feasible to think every student would find the value in the mentoring, however, there was a large positive response rate from the students. The responses to the survey were used as guidance to continue with the services that were in place. The results were high for both the mid-year and end of the year responses for "Mentoring helped me start ninth grade positively" and "There is at least one adult at school who cares about me."

Two questions that did not fit into the mentoring theme for the surveys, but still provided quality feedback were "Do you like high school more than middle school" and "I want to graduate from high school." Since 92% of the students

enjoyed high school more than middle school by the end of their first semester, that was promising news and meant the students were headed in the right direction. Eighty-eight percent of the students wanted to graduate from high school by the end of the fall semester. That information helped the students' counselor know the students were looking towards the future. Instead of tailoring conversations to encourage remaining in school, the topic could focus on the future and plans for after high school.

The research questions were answered through various means of the data analysis. Providing the at-risk students with mentors positively impacted the students grades and behavior. The mentors' intentionality and commitment to the students made it difficult for the students to not complete assignments. The students were asked probing questions that caused them to reflect on their actions and behaviors. The mentor served as an accountability partner for each student whether the conversations were in reference to academics or behavior.

Chapter 4

Findings & Results

At-risk students are more likely to dropout of high school prior to earning a high school diploma because their school experience is likely not positive. Mentoring can be beneficial for at-risk students to provide them with an adult resource who serves as an additional support system. When a student feels connected to school through mentoring, the student may discover a connection to school. The connection to school may be just what prevents the student from dropping out.

In recent years, administration at TCHS has struggled to find practical ways to improve student retention rates. Improving retention rates directly impacts the graduation rate from year to year. For the 2019-2020 school year, the administration was attempting a mentoring pilot program for at-risk ninth graders. The students were identified as at-risk because they had to attend summer school to be promoted to ninth grade.

The following research questions were used as a guide to establish the purpose of the study:

1. How does providing mentoring for at-risk ninth-grade students improve students' academic performance during the transition to high school?
2. How does providing mentoring for at-risk ninth-grade students improve students' behavior during the transition to high school?
3. What were the perceptions of at-risk ninth-grade students regarding various aspects of mentoring provided to them during their freshman year experiences?

Three null hypotheses were tested, and the results are reported later in this chapter. The null hypotheses were:

H₀1: There is no difference in the number of behavior referrals in the Fall 2019 semester for the at-risk students receiving mentoring services compared to at-risk students from the same middle school who were not receiving mentoring services.

H₀2: There is no difference in the number of courses failed in the Fall 2019 semester for the at-risk students receiving mentoring services compared to all other ninth grade at-risk students who were not receiving mentoring services.

H₀3: There is no difference in the number of behavior referrals for the at-risk students receiving mentoring services for Fall 2018 semester as an eighth-grade student compared to the referrals in the Fall 2019 semester.

This chapter provides a discussion of the findings of this study. Individual student interviews, observations, and surveys were qualitative data collected prior to the start of the school year, at mid-semester, and at the end of the semester. Students' grade progress reports and discipline referrals were quantitative data that were collected every six weeks, two different times during the semester. At the end of the semester, the students' final semester grades were used as the final indicator of academic success.

Mentoring Services

Each student's mentoring services were based on the individual's needs in order to help the student succeed academically. Non-academic factors such as

behavior impacts academic performance and was used as a measure of progress as well.

Personalizing the mentoring program to meet each student's specific need was an aspect of this particular mentoring program that made it different. Past mentor program attempts at TCHS had made the assumption that all the students needed the same services. The past attempts were a one-size fits all approach. Each individual student was in need and addressing the specific need was what made this type of mentoring beneficial to the at-risk students.

Class Schedule

TCHS functioned on an A/B Block Rotation Schedule. Students took the same four classes on A-day and another four classes on B-day for both the fall and spring semesters and each class was 90 minutes. Students need to earn a minimum of three credits per semester, six credits for the academic year to be on track to graduate high school in four years.

All classes were full year courses and a student can pass the fall semester of a course and earn the half credit, and the student can fail the spring of the same course and not earn the second half credit. If a student fails one semester or both semesters of a class, the student's credit recovery options were teacher-led summer school or an on-line credit recovery program that was provided by the district.

Students' academic performance was organized each semester on students' transcripts. The half credit the student earns or does not earn each semester was visible on the transcript. Each student was enrolled in eight courses per semester and

can earn a half credit per course per semester. Students who were only enrolled in seven classes were in a study hall or were serving as a teacher's aide. Ninth-grade students were permitted to enroll in a study hall or as a teacher's aide and did not earn a credit for either one.

Demographic Information

TCHS in Lexington, Kentucky, was a member of Fayette County Public Schools. For the 2019-2020 school year, there were 1,753 students enrolled and 559 students were ninth graders. The racial backgrounds of students enrolled were the following: 51% White, 29%, Black, 11% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 6% Other. There were 133 students who have 504 Plans of which 53 were ninth graders. There were 202 ELL students of which 49 were ninth graders (Table 4). There were 183 students who received special education services of which 57 were ninth grade students. There were 79 ninth-graders who were considered at-risk because they were required to attend summer school in 2019, at the end of eighth-grade, to be promoted to ninth grade in the fall 2019.

Table 4

Tates Creek High School Support Services Information

	School-Wide	ninth Grade
Regular Education	1235	400
Special Education	183	57
504 Plans	133	53
ELL	202	49

The 25 students involved in the mentor program were a selective sampling of 14- and 15-year-old first year ninth grade students. The students attended the same middle school in the school district. All 25 students attended summer school at the end of the 8th grade year to be promoted to high school. There were 39 at-risk ninth-graders from the feeder middle school from which the 25 students involved in the mentor program study were randomly selected.

Of the students involved in the study there were 15 males and 10 females. There were two students who received special education services, two students had a 504 Plan, and four students were ELL. The racial backgrounds of the students from the sampling group were the following: five White, 15 Black, four Hispanic, one Other/Arabic.

Results

Academic progress. Table 5 shows each student's academic progression over the course of the semester. There were two progress reports that were issued after the first six weeks and again after 12 weeks. The final semester grade is the final grade that is posted to the student's transcript for grade point average calculations and class rank. A student must pass six of the eight courses each semester to earn three credits each semester and thus be on track to progress to the next grade level. Students need six credits to be a 10th grader, 12 credits to be an 11th grader, and 18 credits to be a 12th grader. Students need 26 credits to graduate.

Table 5

Academic Progression –Number of Classes Failed (Fall 2019)

Classes Failed	1st Progress	2nd Progress	Semester Grades
0	7 (28%)	9 (36%)	11 (44%)
1	7 (28%)	3 (12%)	4 (16%)
2	2 (8%)	3 (12%)	2 (8%)
3	3 (12%)	2 (8%)	1 (4%)
4	2 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
5	2 (8%)	5 (20%)	4 (14%)
6	1 (4%)	2 (8%)	1 (4%)
7	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)
8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)

Benefits. The results of the study indicate that at-risk students benefit academically and their behavior improved as a result of working with an adult mentor. At semester's end, 17 students were on track to progress to 10th grade. These 17 students passed six or more courses during the fall semester. Eight students did not earn the minimum number of credits during the fall semester.

Credits earned. Of the 25 students, 17 passed six or more classes. This is significant progress for this population. All 25 students attended summer school in order to transition to ninth grade. Even though eight students did not pass six or more classes, 24 of the students passed at least one class. One student failed all eight classes.

A two-tailed independent t -test was conducted to compare the number of courses at the end of the Fall 2019 semester failed by the 25 students being mentored to the 14 students from the same middle school that were not being mentored. Based on the results ($t(37) = 3.689$, $p = 0.001$, $d = 1.23$), the group of students that were not being mentored had a significantly greater number of failure ($M = 5.286$, $SD = 2.614$) compared to the students receiving mentoring services ($M = 2.080$, $SD = 2.597$) at the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, the rejection of the null hypothesis that there was no difference in the number of classes failed between the two groups of ninth-graders coming from the same middle school was warranted. Table 6 provides the results of the t -test conducted.

Table 6

Course Failure Rate of Students Mentored and Not Mentored from the Same Middle School – Fall 2019

	N	M	SD	df	t	p	d
Mentored	25	2.080	2.597	37	3.689	0.001	1.23
Not Mentoring	14	5.286	2.614				

An independent two-tailed t -test was conducted to compare the number of courses at the end of the Fall 2019 semester failed by the 25 students being mentored to the 54 students from the freshman class that were not being mentored. Based on the results ($t(77) = 6.305$, $p = 0.000$, $d = 1.53$), the group of students that were not being mentored had a significantly greater number of failure ($M = 5.519$, $SD = 2.081$) compared to the students receiving mentoring services ($M = 2.080$, $SD = 2.597$) at the

0.05 significance level. Therefore, the rejection of the null hypothesis that there was no difference in the number of classes failed between the two groups of ninth-graders who were all at-risk students. Table 7 provides the results of the *t*-test conducted.

Table 7

Course Failure Rate of Ninth-Grade Students Mentored and Not Mentored – Fall 2019

	N	M	SD	df	t	p	d
Mentored	25	2.08	2.597	77	6.305	0.000	1.53
Not Mentoring	54	5.519	2.081				

Behavior incidents. There were 12 students who had a decrease in behavior discipline referrals when comparing the fall semesters of eighth grade and ninth grade. Five students never received a discipline referral in middle school or during the fall semester of ninth grade, two students had no change in the number of referrals, and six students had an increase in discipline referrals from the fall semester of eighth grade to the fall semester of ninth grade. (Table 8)

Table 8

Discipline Referrals Comparison Between Fall 2018 and Fall 2019

<i>Number of Referrals</i>	Fall 2018	Fall 2019
<i>0-1</i>	7 (28%)	8 (32%)
<i>2-3</i>	5 (20%)	10 (40%)
<i>4-5</i>	5 (20%)	2 (8%)
<i>6-7</i>	3 (12%)	4 (1%)
<i>8-9</i>	2 (8%)	1 (4%)
<i>10-11</i>	1 (4%)	0 (0%)
<i>12-13</i>	1 (4%)	0 (0%)
<i>14-15</i>	1 (4%)	0 (0%)

Behavior data for the first semester of the 2018-2019 school year compared to the same data for the same period in 2019-2020 school year indicated that fewer ninth grade students were referred for disciplinary issues. For the 25 students in the mentoring program, the mean number of referrals in 2018 was 4.400 (SD = 4.173) compared to the mean number of referrals in 2019 of 2.880 (SD = 2.522). A dependent t-test indicated that there was a significant decrease in the number of referrals from the first semester of 2018 compared to the first semester of 2019, $t(24)=2.354$, $p = 0.014$, $d =0.47$. (See Table 9)

Table 9

Behavior Referrals for Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 of At-Risk Students

	N	M	SD	df	t	p	d
Fall 2018	25	4.400	4.173	24	2.354	0.014	0.47
Fall 2019	25	2.880	2.522				

Individual interviews. At the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year, the researcher met with the students in the study to discuss the importance of freshman year. This meeting was a more formal discussion than the meeting in the summer. The researcher stressed asking questions to understand, making good decisions, and the potential implications for being a follower instead of a leader. The researcher posed the following question to each student:

Think back to last year. I'm sure there were things you did well and there were areas where you needed to change. Here at the high school, we want every student to succeed and meet his/her full potential. 'Good' does not mean the same for everyone. Do not compare yourself to others. Everyone's success is different. Reflection is very important and I'm sure there are things you would do differently in high school than you did in middle school. What do you need help with this year that will help you succeed? There is no wrong answer.

As presented in Table 10, the students' responses were categorized into common themes all the students were feeling, experienced, or communicated. The majority of students cited "submitting assignments" as the greatest area where support was needed. Of the 11 students, eight admitted to completing the work, but lost it, misplaced it, or forgot to turn it in to the teacher.

Table 10

Students' Responses Categorized

Student Response	Number of Students
Do Not Know/Do Not Need Help	2 (6.06)%
Make Better Decisions	3 (9.09%)
Attendance	4 (12.12%)
Not Getting Involved in Drama	4 (12.12%)
Self Control/Remaining Focused	9 (27.27%)
Submitting Assignments	11 (33.33%)

Nine students cited “Self-Control/Remaining Focused” as the area where assistance was needed the most. The students’ self-control/focus issues ranged from incessant talking, to horseplaying with classmates, and staying seated during the class. The students’ behaviors were at such a level their academic performance was affected negatively.

“Attendance” and “Not Getting Involved in Drama” garnered four responses each. In regards to attendance, all four students had issues in middle school arriving to school on time as well as tardies to class. Three of the four students had been assigned a Court Designated Worker due to truancy concerns. Two of the four students were successful to not get involved in drama, but one student did have a conflict that resulted in a physical altercation. The student was suspended out-of-school as a result of the fight. The other student was involved in a verbal altercation that resulted in an in-school consequence.

“Making Better Decisions” was the focus for three students. The better decisions ranged from choosing a more positive friend group to making a conscious effort to try. One student who wanted to make a better effort to try had never really made an effort to be successful, but wanted to have a good freshman year. The student’s behavior improved significantly from eighth grade to ninth grade.

The two students who “Do Not Know/Do Not Need Help” were very apathetic and not interested in school. Neither student was ever rude or disrespectful, but never hid the fact they were not interested in making changes. Many efforts were made by multiple mentors to encourage the students to get involved in a club or organization that was affiliated with school. Neither student was interested. Both students agreed to the mentoring because their parents made them and they wanted to get out of class. By October, the researcher tried to find non-instructional times to speak with these two students. In the café during breakfast and lunch, during study hall, or after school were the best times for these two students. The efforts to help the students never ended. Although there was no progress academically, the researcher and the two students did form a healthy relationship.

These data pieces were extremely valuable for the researcher. The students’ responses were used as the guide for establishing the students’ mentoring program and what each student needed to be successful. This allowed the students an opportunity take a more active role in their education.

Mid-semester survey check-in. In October 2019, the students completed an anonymous mid-semester survey to assess the productivity of the mentoring services

the students were receiving. The survey was anonymous in an effort to garner truthful responses. There was a series of questions and the students chose the answer that was the most appropriate response based on their experiences being mentored for the first two months of school.

The students' responses to the mid-semester survey were favorable. The large majority of the students' responses were in support of the mentoring. The researcher was concerned with the small number of negative responses. The negative responses indicated the students' needs were not being met. The determination for why the students' needs were not being met cannot be identified.

The purpose of the survey was to collect data about how the students were feeling regarding their mentoring process. This was new territory for the students. The students who were used to being with an administrator, were there for disciplinary reasons in the past. Seventy-sixty percent of the students felt the extra support of a mentor was helping them succeed in the ninth grade. Eighty-eight percent of students were in agreeance that mentoring helped the student start ninth grade positively. Most importantly, 84% of the students agreed that at least one adult at school cared about the student.

End of the semester survey. When students returned to school in January 2020 after Winter Break, they completed the same survey from the mid-semester check-in to allow for a comparison of responses. The survey was completed after completing a full semester with supports and the day prior to final grades being

posted to remove any potential bias or anger, depending on how each student performed academically (Table 11).

Table 11

Mid-Semester & End of the Semester Survey Results (N=25)

	Yes		No		Not Sure / Maybe	
	Mid	End	Mid	End	Mid	End
Do you like high school more than middle school?	84%	92%	4%	4%	12%	4%
Do you feel the extra support of a mentor is helping you succeed in the ninth grade?	76%	60%	24%	16%	0%	24%
Did the mentoring motivate you to work harder to pass all your class?	64%	80%	20%	12%	16%	8%
Mentoring helped me start ninth grade positively?	88%	92%	4%	4%	8%	4%
Knowing someone is monitoring my grades and behavior motivates me to do better.	92%	76%	12%	16%	16%	8%
Did the mentoring helped make the transition to high school easier?	72%	88%	8%	4%	20%	8%
There is at least one adult at school who cares about me.	84%	92%	8%	4%	8%	4%

The students' responses to the end of the semester survey were favorable (see Table 11). The results indicated that many of the students' responses changed from a

previous negative response from the mid-semester survey to a positive response for the end of the year survey.

For the end of the semester survey, 80% of the students responded they felt the mentoring motivated them to work harder in class. Ninety-two percent of the students agreed that mentoring helped them start ninth grade positively and 88% acknowledged the mentoring helped make the transition to high school easier. There was an 8% increase from the mid-semester check-in to 92% for the end of the semester survey for students who felt there was at least one adult at school who cared about the student. The relationship piece was one of the goals of the mentoring program. This directly correlated to the study's research questions and hypotheses and validated the value of the mentoring.

Relationships. The relationships at-risk students developed with the mentors were powerful and far exceeded the researcher's expectations. The students had a history of not being able to depend on adults from their personal lives and academic lives. The students were used to being labeled as "troubled" or "bad" kids. Since that was the moniker applied to many of them, that was the behavior or attitude they exhibited regularly.

Forming strong, healthy relationships was a major component of the Freshman Academy. The mentoring the at-risk ninth grade students received doubled the attention the students were receiving from the mentors and created an accountability partner for the students. The mentors made a conscious effort to form healthy, appropriate relationships with the students. The students were more inclined

to want to perform well academically and behaviorally and stated that was the case towards the end of the semester.

The students were surprised to learn that attending summer school would not guarantee advancing to 10th grade. As 8th graders, if they did not meet academic expectations and failed, the students could attend summer school and pass. Many of the students made comments at the beginning of the school year about summer school and school personnel heard many times, “I can go to summer school if I fail.” There were seven students who did not earn enough credits by passing a minimum of six classes in the Fall semester to advance to 10th grade. The mentor has spoken with all seven students to discuss next steps. Two of the seven students have shown no interest in a remediation plan. The mentor, and the students’ counselors, have also contacted the two students’ parent/guardian to notify the students’ families of the remediation plan.

Conclusion

At-risk students are more inclined to dropout of high school prior to earning a diploma and graduating and mentoring can provide more structure for at-risk students. If a student cannot find the value in an education, the student is less likely to attempt to do well in school.

Of the 25 students who participated in the study, 22 admitted they did not try as hard in eighth-grade as they did in the Fall semester of ninth-grade because they did not have anyone checking on them as frequently in eighth-grade. In middle school, the students rarely had positive interactions with teachers or administrators

after they were in trouble. As a ninth-grade student, inappropriate behavior was not tolerated, but it did not mean that adults cast the student aside. The inappropriate behavior was discussed, and the student had to think about how to behave differently if posed with the same situation again.

The students involved in the mentoring program had a great opportunity to start fresh with the transition to high school. Many of the students wanted to do well because there was an adult, or multiple adults in some cases, working together to intentionally remove barriers. The barriers varied depending on each student's needs. Too many times, school personnel assume parents/guardians do not care, but the reality was school may have been intimidating for some adults, depending on the experience the parent/guardian had as a high school student. Depending on the parents'/guardians' work schedule, contacting the school or attempting to schedule a parent/teacher conference was not possible.

During a conversation with one student, it was discovered that he was failing five classes after the first interim progress report. The student's family was experiencing financial trouble and food was sparse and the family had received their final payment notice for the Kentucky Utilities bill. The school's Family Resource Youth Service Center (FRYSC) Coordinator was able to connect the student's mother with a local agency who could provide assistance. The student's grades were suffering because he was worried about electricity and food. Once that need was addressed, the student's grades improved significantly. The student worked hard and

went from passing three classes at the first interim progress report to passing all eight classes by semester's end.

Since this student had a positive relationship with an adult in the building that he trusted, the student felt comfortable sharing his family's struggle. The school was able and happy to assist even though the issue was not a school related. Non-school related issues have a way of negatively impacting a student's school performance. Non-academic barriers affect students as much as academic barriers. Many at-risk students have not had an opportunity to build a strong, positive relationship with an adult and the relationship the student built with the FRYSC has made a significant difference in the student's life. Many times, at-risk students' interactions with adults were negative. The negative interactions were a result of the student doing something inappropriate and adults not extending grace, considering immaturity, or practicing empathy.

The relationship the students were able to form with multiple adults in the building had a significant positive impact as well. Many of the students felt as though they had been labeled as "bad" or "dumb" in middle school and there was no way to leave that reputation behind. Sitting in the principal's office for a check-in was foreign to the majority of the students. Their past experiences in the principal's office had been for disciplinary reasons. Meeting with the students prior to the first day of school made a difference.

The positive relationship with multiple adults gave many of the students the motivation to maintain good grades, act appropriately, or ask for help if the student

needed it. One of the goals of the mentoring program was to help teach the students skills to be successful in school. For the students who wanted to make changes in order to improve, their hard work was evident in the students' grades and behavior. The students who accepted the extra support from the mentor program made positive gains.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Actions, and Implications

The transition from high school to middle school can be a major struggle for many students, even for students who come from supportive homes and are not identified as at-risk. The difficulty with the transition is nothing new and continues after years of attempts to refine the system. At-risk students are more likely to drop out due to their disinterest in school. According to Smith (2006)

Overall, high-achieving middle school and high school students perform quite well in the semester following their educational transition to high school and/or college, respectively; however, a subset of high-achieving students experience substantial achievement loss or failure after the transition.

Although achievement loss is described as a normative process, the long-term impact of achievement loss in high-achieving students is missing from the literature on educational transitions. (p. 211)

Students who are fortunate enough to have a mentor have an extra support system that is designed to remove barriers to help the student with academic and non-academic concerns. When a student transitioning to high school has an opportunity to visit or experience the high school before he/she enrolls, the student has a much better chance of being successful in high school. “Students who attend schools with an explicit transition program are more likely to experience a smooth transition to high school than students who attend schools without this type of program” (Smith, 2006, p. 212). There is no full-proof program to solve the struggle associated with

transitioning from middle school to high school, but individualized supports can make a significant positive impact for at-risk students.

Summary of Results and Findings

The results of the study indicated that mentoring for at-risk ninth grade students was beneficial. Mentoring helped provide additional structure and support to help meet students' academic and non-academic needs.

The first research question, "How does providing mentoring for at-risk ninth-grade students improve students' academic performance during the transition to high school?" was answered by the students' increased academic performance. Of the students involved in the study, 68% passed six or more classes. These students were on track to progress to 10th grade without having to attend summer school. Sixty-eight percent of students passing six or more classes was significant progress for students who had previously been required to attend summer school after their 8th grade year because they had failed too many core courses and electives.

Each middle school in Fayette County establishes the requirements for what failing means for their school. If any student who was required to attend summer school did not attend summer school or was dismissed from summer school due to behavior concerns or for not meeting attendance expectations, the student was retained in 8th grade for another year. The transition to high school can be very difficult for ninth grade students. At-risk students have a higher chance of dropping out and the relationship with a mentor can assist in serving as a motivator.

In terms of behavior, the students' responded well to the supports from the mentors. The second research question, "How does providing mentoring for at-risk ninth-grade students improve students' behavior during the transition to high school?" was answered because 12 students had a decrease in discipline referrals when comparing the fall semesters from eighth grade to ninth grade. Five students did not receive a discipline referral in the fall semester of ninth grade or at any time during eighth grade. Many of the students cited they received more support this year than ever before. The weekly check-ins from an adult made a significant difference in the students' lives. Through conversations with the students, the mentors were able to know each individual student's needs. The students' needs varied in terms of academic struggles and some students faced similar non-academic issues. The non-academic issues ranged from issues at home to conflicts with peers. Without the mentoring, it was very likely no one would have known about the students' struggles.

In regards to the third research question, "What were the perceptions of at-risk ninth-grade students regarding various aspects of mentoring provided to them during their freshman year experiences?" the qualitative data collected from the surveys, observations, and interviews answered this question. As a result of the study, numerous things were discovered. As the mentors' relationships strengthened with the students, the students were more inclined to speak honestly about their needs. Many of the students felt they were considered "bad kids" in middle school and were happy to change how they were perceived by others and themselves.

The students indicated that more focus needed to be placed on the ninth grade students having a better knowledge of the areas of the building such as specific classrooms in the Freshman Academy, the media center, cafeteria, and gym. Many of the students were used to being escorted to the cafeteria for lunch in middle school and that was not the case when the students transitioned to the high school. In middle school, the students also had a designated location to report to before school started. At the high school level, students arrive and there are many options for students until the warning bell rings for the first class at 8:20 AM.

By the end of the semester, 88% of the students felt mentoring helped make the transition to high school easier. Additionally, 92% of the students acknowledged there was at least one adult at school who cared about him/her. These findings were very beneficial to the researcher for immediate next steps for the students and future plans.

Intpretations

The students who were involved in the mentoring program performed better than at-risk peers who were not receiving the additional supports. There were 79 students who were required to attend summer school to be promoted to ninth grade. There were 25 students who were involved in this study and 17 of them were on track to be promoted to 10th grade for the 2020-2021 school year. When compared to the other 54 at-risk students who were not involved in the mentor program, these 17 students performed better academically and with their behavior. The students enjoyed different aspects of the mentoring. For the students of color, it provided

them with an opportunity to work closely with an adult of the same race. One of the female students cited that working with a female police officer was “pretty cool, I’ve never had a chance to get close with a woman in charge.”

Individualizing the mentoring for each individual student was beneficial and the most successful part of the study. Each student had a different need that was a potential barrier and could have been the reason the student decided to not make an effort to improve academically or with behavior. As the students began to trust the researcher more, the students would ask for help with a teacher or peer conflict. The researcher stressed the importance of communication and asking for help when there was a problem. There were three times if one of the students had asked for help, it would have prevented a behavior incident that resulted in an out-of-school suspension.

Individualizing the mentoring for each student involved in the study also helped the students learn to accept help very quickly. Once the students realized the mentoring services were about them as individuals, each student believed there was an adult, or multiple adults, who were invested in him/her as an individual student. For many of the students, it was the first time they felt a special connection to an adult at the school level. It was also the first time many of the students felt they could depend on an adult who did not cast them away when they made multiple mistakes.

Many of the students’ past relationships with adults at the school level were not positive. The majority of the students were hesitant to open up not only to the researcher, but any adult in the beginning. The students’ negative experiences with

former administrators and teachers made it difficult for them to discuss their personal lives in detail at the beginning of the school year. The lack of former relationships with adults in their previous educational settings established how the students felt negatively about school personnel. Even at the end of the fall semester, there were a small number of students who were not willing to discuss any personal information. Those same students were hesitant to discuss school-related concerns.

Every student mentioned that he/she attended summer school in order to get promoted to high school. None of the students acknowledged their own roles in possibly being retained if they did not attend summer school at the end of the 8th grade year. The students knew all they had to do was attend summer school to get promoted. Of the 25 students, 23 agreed they did not try too hard in 8th grade because they knew they could attend summer school to get promoted to ninth grade.

Implications for Improvement and Change

Creating, implementing, and maintaining an additional program within a high school is never an easy task. In terms of mentors, the adults in the building have to be committed to the task of providing extra supports to students. A program of this nature eventually becomes another structure that is part of the school community. The structure of school has changed for teachers and administrators and it was difficult to imagine adding one more thing to an educator's work load. A mentoring program, if done correctly, was not one more thing to do. Mentoring should be taking place, in some manner, for all students. Students identified as at-risk were more in need of additional supports if they were going to work through barriers.

The initial planning and implementation for a program that impacts large numbers of students was time-consuming. Along with the planning, an accountability system had to be in place to ensure the students' needs were being met.

Accountability for both the students and adults was important. The students had to be committed to making changes and the adults had to be committed to being a dependable support for each student.

Finding enough adults to participate as mentors could be a barrier to growing the program. The researcher did not have any issues with having enough adults to serve as a mentor. Classroom teachers, counselors, administrators, and law enforcement officers were all willing to participate because they could see the potential benefits. For years, faculty and staff have complained about ninth grade students' lack of motivation and bad attitudes. This was a way for key adults to serve the school community in a different capacity for the betterment of the at-risk ninth graders.

In some communities, with the many responsibilities that teachers already have, it would be difficult to convince some teachers this is not just one more thing to do. Even for the teachers who want to assist, when do they have the time to do more than what they are already doing to support students' needs? Using non-school adults creates a potential issue in regards to reliability and dependability. The last thing an at-risk student needs is an adult who claims to want to help, but does not follow through with checking-in or providing any means of support over a consistent period of time.

The time commitment to the student was one of the most difficult aspects of mentoring. It was explained to every adult that it was imperative to maintain a professional relationship with the student and to follow through with the commitment. If the student was told there would be a check-in on a certain day and time, it had to be a priority to meet with the student. The students were already leery of the extra supports so the adults involved had to prove themselves to the students.

Limitations

The limitations of the study were the timing of study and the lack of racial diversity of the participants. A delimitation of the study was the sample size. Improving these items could further positively impact ninth grade students' success.

For an initial study in an established high school, the small percentage of those participating was acceptable but was a delimitation of the study. To illicit more results and provide a greater impact for a larger population of students, expanding the sample size would be imperative. The current study involves approximately five percent of the ninth grade class. To sustain the program for the future, more mentors would be necessary. Qualified mentors who were interested in serving the school community in this manner are the mentors who should be considered. The sample size was controlled by the researcher. The small sample was chosen since the program was new and not established.

The lack of racial diversity could be addressed with a larger sample size in the future. As more structures are put into place with 8th grade students to ease the transition to ninth grade, the hope is there are fewer students who need to attend

summer school to be promoted to the high school for ninth grade. The high school is working to establish professional learning communities between eighth grade and ninth grade teachers in order to help better prepare the eighth graders for high school. If all at-risk ninth grade students who attended summer school were assigned a mentor, the limitations of the current study would be addressed. The hope is that mentors from the high school could be assigned to middle school students to begin the mentoring process sooner. The administration teams between the middle school and high school have discussed the potential for such a structure, the need, and potential benefits for the students' futures.

Recommendations

The results of the study further supports the need for at-risk students to have an adult mentor to support their individual academic and/or behavior needs. The mentor program must be flexible and address what the student specifically needs instead of a one-size fits all approach. The researcher recommends that all ninth grade students be assigned a mentor. All students can benefit from the personalized support. At the very minimum, all ninth grade students who are identified as at-risk should have an adult mentor to help navigate ninth grade and this would benefit the students. Graduation rates could realistically increase significantly after three to five years of implementation.

Currently, Move-Up Day provides as an opportunity for current 8th grade students to visit the high school a half day in May. The students tour a few classes for a few minutes, talk to current ninth graders, and eat lunch in the cafeteria. This

day serves as a mini-transition to high school and allows the students to see an aspect of ninth grade from the perspective of a high school student. This structure should remain in place and is invaluable to the effective transition for students.

Moving forward, it may benefit students even more to spend additional time in the high school setting as a middle school student. If possible, additional time as an eighth grade student or time as a seventh grade and eighth grade student allows students to familiarize themselves with the school culture prior to becoming a ninth grade student. It also may serve as a motivator for students who may be struggling to understand the value of their current middle school setting.

Future Actions

Plans to further develop the relationship with the feeder middle schools that transition students to TCHS is imperative. Currently, eighth grade students visit the high school for a half day in the spring to experience the high school in a realistic manner. Currently, Move-Up Day is the only opportunity these students have to visit the high school prior to becoming students. There are a handful of eighth grade students who take Algebra II, but those students do not struggle academically or behaviorally when they become high school students.

Ideally, as the relationship continues to strengthen between the high school principal and the middle school feeder principals, there will be more opportunities for the schools to work together. As the culture of schools change, it is necessary to change the practices to meet students' needs. Times continue to change and educational practices should reflect changes as well.

The administrators, counselors, eighth grade teachers, and ninth grade teachers should be communicating with one another, at a minimum of once per semester. The administrators and counselors should be discussing broad transition plans for all current eighth grade students. Transition plans should be discussed more specifically for at-risk students. At-risk students should have an opportunity to visit the high school once per semester during the eighth grade year.

Teachers should discuss assessment data, content, and successful strategies that are working. It is an opportunity for the eighth grade teachers and ninth grade teachers to collaborate to help better prepare students for ninth grade and high school in general. Making a connection with students in middle school provides students, especially at-risk students, an opportunity to see their future new school prior to the start of ninth grade.

Moving forward, it is necessary to continue to try new activities to support ninth grade students' needs. As society has progressed and changed, our schools have to be willing to progress and change as well. Schools have to be more reflective of the services being provided for students. It has become very typical for a school's protocols to remain the same because they work. A school cannot grow without change and continuous improvement.

In terms of new activities, the researcher would like to involve upper-class students in the future when expanding the program. The upper-class students could possibly impact the at-risk students far more than the adults. It is necessary that all potential mentors are vetted and provided with the appropriate on-going training and

supervision to ensure the activity remains appropriate and the focus is on the at-risk students' needs. The current at-risk students could serve as peer mentors in the future as they continue to grow as people and students. The best mentors have lived the struggle others are trying to overcome. Having been former at-risk students, they would be able to relate to the students and serve as great role models for the ninth graders. It could be an excellent example of the "before" and "after" with work and determination.

There is a concern about expanding the program and even maintaining the program in its current state. The benefits of mentoring far outweigh any negative components, but what happens to the students after freshman year? It will be imperative to maintain the relationships that have been built. It is also imperative to equip the students with the skills they need to be more independent 10th grade students. As the ninth grade year ends, the mentors will begin having discussions about next year.

Additionally for the future, it will be helpful for the upper-class guidance counselors and assistant principals to be involved. This will allow the at-risk ninth grade students to begin forming relationships with adults they will encounter. The upper-class guidance counselors and assistant principals' involvement in mentoring at-risk ninth grade students provide additional adults and helps keep the mentor to student ratio low. With this initial group, the researcher did not think about the future when designing the study. At the time, including only the ninth grade principal and

ninth grade counselors were sufficient. The researcher was not looking at the broad picture and next steps for the students once they transitioned from ninth grade.

Reflections

Through the planning and implementation of the study, the researcher learned many things. Some of the things the researcher learned were not surprising, however, there were many things the researcher had not thought of and were pleasant surprises.

The quantitative results of the study were not surprising. It makes sense that a student's academic performance and behavior would improve with specialized one on one attention. The qualitative results such as the in-class observations were interesting. As the semester progressed, the students' behaviors changed when the researcher would visit a class to conduct a walk-through. The students never knew the researcher was observing them, but due to the relationship the researcher built with the students, the students were noticeably different when the researcher was present.

One surprise was the impact the mentoring had on the students and their perceptions of adults at school. Many of the students did not have favorable experiences with former administrators, law enforcement officers, and in some cases, teachers. Many of the students were shocked and amazed with the longevity of the mentoring. In the past, many of them had mentors who met with them once or twice and never returned. Their current mentoring lasting an entire semester, and continuing after they returned from Winter Break, has been a new experience.

The researcher did not expect for the mentoring program to have as much of a positive impact on the school community as it did. The students who were involved have a newfound confidence and sense of belonging. The students were appreciative and being involved with the mentors encouraged them to want to come to school.

The researcher did not intentionally think about how serving as a mentor would affect the adults in the building. Two of the mentors stated that being involved “was refreshing” and “life-changing.” The mentors were selected by the researcher and those chosen felt valued and that they were needed to help make a difference. This piece helped increase morale for the mentors and within the Freshman Academy. A lot of effort and time goes into the Freshman Academy and too many times, interventions are teacher-led. With this mentoring model, administration, counselors, and other support staff were the primary mentors and the teachers appreciated not being given an additional task.

Conclusions

The transition to high school is extremely difficult for ninth grade students, especially those students who are considered at-risk. The ninth Grade Academy was designed to provide more support for ninth graders in order to combat the academic and behavior concerns for students. Creating a school within a school for ninth graders was a major task for TCHS, but in the long run the decision to implement the structure was best for students and the school community.

“One major tenet of the of the freshman center model is to create a sense of community often absent in a large high school and to ease academic social transition

from middle school to high school” (Smith et al. 2008, p. 33). The power of the freshman academy has made a tremendous difference in the culture, climate, and academics at Tates Creek High School. Critics feel this structure only prolongs high school. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, school districts began to transition from the junior high to middle school concept. Ninth grade students were part of junior high and high school started at 10th grade and there were no transition programs in place for students transitioning to high school.

In some respects, ninth grade students are too young for high school. Ninth-graders range in age from 13-15 years old and the younger the student, the more likely the student will struggle with the freedom and different structures of high school. Middle school was very organized and structured for the students and when they transitioned to high school, many of the structured activities and safety nets stopped. Students have more opportunities to stray from expectations and positive behaviors in high school because the building is larger and there is significantly less escorting to different locations.

Mentoring can be the first in step in providing necessary supports for all students, especially at-risk students. The mentoring program designed for this study helped the students feel welcomed and safe and the students were more inclined to respond to the additional structures and supports in order to succeed. This study has found that mentoring positively impacts students and can potentially serve as an intervention to prevent dropping out.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Initial Meeting: One-on-one Interview

“What do you need help with in order to be successful this school year?”

Potential Follow-Up Questions:

- How do you know when you are getting angry?
- What is one thing that helps you stay calm and/or focused during class?
- Does your family get upset with you when you get in trouble at school?
- Does your family get upset with the school when you get in trouble at school?
- What do you like most about school?
- How could school be more interesting for you?

Appendix B

Beginning of the Year One-on-one Interview:

Think back to last year. I'm sure there were things you did well and there were areas where you needed to change. Here at the high school, we want every student to succeed and meet his/her full potential. 'Good' does not mean the same for everyone. Do not compare yourself to others. Everyone's success is different. Reflection is very important and I'm sure there are things you would do differently in high school than you did in middle school. What do you need help with this year that will help you succeed? There is no wrong answer.

Appendix C

Mid-Semester Survey

Do you like high school more than middle school?

How do you feel the semester is going?

Do you feel the extra support of a mentor is helping you succeed in the ninth grade?

Does the mentoring motivate you to work harder to pass all your classes?

Mentoring has helped me start ninth grade positively.

Knowing someone is monitoring my grades and behavior motivates me to do better.

Has mentoring helped make the transition to high school easier?

I'm going to pass ninth grade and will be a 10th grader next year.

There's at least one adult at school who cares about me.

I want to graduate from high school.

Appendix D

End of the Semester Survey

Do you like high school more than middle school?

How do you feel the first semester went?

Do you feel the extra support of a mentor helped you succeed in the ninth grade?

Did the mentoring motivate you to work harder to pass all your classes?

Mentoring helped me start ninth grade positively.

Knowing someone is monitoring my grades and behavior motivates me to do better.

Did mentoring help make the transition to high school easier?

I'm going to pass ninth grade and will be a 10th grader next year.

There's at least one adult at school who cares about me.

I want to graduate from high school.

VITA

ANTHONY JAMAR MILLS

EDUCATION

May, 2002	Bachelor of Arts University of Kentucky Lexington, Kentucky
May, 2003	Master of Arts University of Kentucky Lexington, Kentucky
August, 2006	Master of Arts Eastern Kentucky University Morehead, Kentucky
Pending	Doctor of Education Morehead State University Morehead, Kentucky

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

July, 2017	Principal Tates Creek High School Lexington, Kentucky
July, 2010	Associate Principal Tates Creek High School Lexington, Kentucky
August, 2003	English Teacher Tates Creek High School Lexington, Kentucky

HONORS

March, 2019	FAME Award Fayette County Public Schools Lexington, Kentucky
May, 2015	Teacher Who Made a Difference Bracktown First Baptist Church Lexington, Kentucky
April, 2014	Teacher Who Made A Difference University of Kentucky Lexington, Kentucky
April, 2010	FAME Award Fayette County Public Schools Lexington, Kentucky
April, 2009	Teacher Who Made a Difference University of Kentucky Lexington, Kentucky
April, 2006	FAME Award Fayette County Public Schools Lexington, Kentucky