

FRESHMAN ACADEMIES AND THE TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL: AN
INVESTIGATION OF STAGE-ENVIRONMENT FIT THEORY

By

CHERYL ROSE KMIEC

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In memory of my love, my best friend, my husband
Jayson Thomas Kmiec

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LIST OF TERMS

AYP	Under Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) is the way states, districts, and schools are held responsible for student learning and performance.
Constructivism	A paradigm held by those who believe that many realities exist. Reality is constructed by the individual's interactions with the world. Constructivism focuses on a person's meaning making process.
Freshman Academy	Most commonly referred to in the literature as freshman academies, but also called a ninth-grade/freshman house, freshman academies are designed to help students successfully make the transition to high school. For the sake of this study, the term freshman academy is used to describe this unique reform initiative. Ninth grade students are placed on student-teacher teams and typically kept together in their own portion of the campus. Teachers frequently teach using cross-curricular strategies. Freshman academies also provide additional support structures designed to help students adjust to high school.
House	House plans divide up a large school into smaller groups of students either across grades or by grade level. Students take most, if not all, of their classes with students from the same house and are taught by house teachers. Students can remain in the same house for one year or multiple years.
Keystone	Freshman transition course.
Looping	Looping is when classes, sometimes teams of students, move from one grade level to the next with one another, along with their teachers.
Proximity	Proximity is when team classrooms are physically located close to one another.
Purity	Purity is the extent to which teams share common students.
Stage-Environment Fit Theory	A theory proposed by Eccles & Midgley (1989) which proposes that changes in educational environments during certain developmental periods could result in negative outcomes if the environment does not match students' developmental needs.
SLC	SLC's (small learning communities) break a school down into individual learning environments. Examples of small learning communities include academies, house plans, schools-within-schools, and magnet schools.

SLC Coordinators At some point during the federal implementation grant, each school had an SLC specialist and project manager. Collectively, these positions coordinated each school's SLC program.

Transition Team A group of teachers, typically core subject teachers, who share a similar group of students.

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By

Cheryl Rose Kmiec

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This dissertation investigated the application of the stage-environment fit theory to the middle-to-high-school transition. Results of the study indicate that the stage-environment fit theory can be applied to the middle-to-high-school transition into freshman academies. Every year, nationwide, thousands of students move from middle schools to large, comprehensive high schools without solid support structures in place to help them make this transition successfully. As a result, many ninth graders often experience a host of negative outcomes, including a decline in academic performance. Nationwide, high school reform, aimed at this problem, is taking place. Many reform movements are focusing on reorganizing large high schools into small learning communities, including freshman academies, in an attempt to help students adjust and to keep them in school. My study documented one large school district's attempt to help students in three high schools move into and adjust to high school through the implementation of freshman academies. Qualitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, observations, and the collection of documents, were used to address the question: How might the implementation of freshman academies help students make the transition to high school? A total of 67 people participated in this study. Along with the collection of archival data, 12 interviews, 13 focus

groups, and 22 observations were conducted throughout a three-week period from April to May 2007. From these data, three cases were created to describe participants' perceptions on how the implementation of their freshman academy might have helped students transition to high school. Overall, my study suggests that freshman academies may help to personalize the high school experience when initiatives are completely implemented. Many freshman academy initiatives are difficult to put into practice and are only perceived to be truly effective and beneficial in helping students make the transition to high school when they are fully operational.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Ninth grade proves to be a pivotal year for youth! (Chute, 1999, para 1)

Ninth-grade academies keep kids in school! (Chmelynski, 2004, p. 48)

Many students experience difficulty during the middle-to-high-school transition, finding it hard to adjust to ninth grade and high school life (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cushman, 2006; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999; Letgers & Kerr, 2001; Mizelle, 1999, 2005; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2001; Queen, 2002; Southern Regional Education Board [SREB], 2002). A majority of students experience a school transition between eighth and ninth grade. High school educators report using few practices that support students during this time, escalating the difficulties associated with this transition (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999; Roderick & Camburn, 1996). The freshman year is referred to as “the leakiest point in the pipeline” (Herlihy as cited in Burnette, 2007).

Eccles and Midgley (1989) found that changes in the developmental nature of students’ educational environments during school transitions could result in negative outcomes if their environments do not match their developmental needs. Incoming freshmen enter developmentally unsupportive environments. Schools that emphasize departmentalization, ability grouping, teacher-centered pedagogy, and strict student discipline and control do not meet the educational and developmental needs of many young adolescents (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Queen, 2002). This traditional style of schooling, popularized over one century ago, is still evident in the twenty-first century as many of today’s high schools fit the above description. Despite changes in both student demographics and in society, many high schools have

experienced few curriculum, administrative, or structural changes since the latter part of the nineteenth century (Maxwell & Rubin, 2000).

These inappropriate environments produce a host of negative outcomes, such as poor academic performance and a decline in motivation, especially for ninth graders. The freshman year has been coined “the holding tank” for high schools, based on reports that ninth-grade failure rates are three to five times that of other grades (SREB, 2002). Due to retention, there are more students in ninth grade than any other grade, creating a bulge in the high school population at this grade. These students have only begun their high school experience and are already disadvantaged. Students held back once in high school reduce their chances of graduating by 50%, while students held back twice decrease their chances of graduating by 75% (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998). Ninth-grade failure is a major predictor of whether students will drop out of high school (Neild et al., 2001).

The freshman academy, a type of small learning community, may help freshmen make the transition to and remain in high school by creating an environment that supports their developmental needs (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center [CSRQS], 2005; Cotton, 2001; Kerr, 2002; Fields, 2005; SREB, 2002). Since 2001, recognizing the potential of this type of reform, the U.S. Department of Education has earmarked millions of dollars each year in competitive grants for the formation of small learning communities in American high schools.¹ Organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation have invested in the restructuring of large high schools into small learning communities, including freshman academies.

¹ In FY 2001, the Department of Education awarded \$125,000,000 in planning and implementation grants. Six years later, in the FY 2006, the Department of Education awarded \$93,531,240 in planning and implementation grants (US DOE, 2006).

This study attempted to answer the following questions: What exactly is it about the freshman academy organizational practice that may help students adjust to high school? What occurs on a daily basis that may make the freshman academy successful with helping students move into high school?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to gain insight into the appropriateness of applying the stage-environment fit theory to the middle-to-high-school transition into freshman academies. Because case studies are intended to “capture the complexity of a single case” (Stake, 1995, xi), this study focused on the nature of the freshman academy, its transitional elements, developmental appropriateness, organization, and participant perceptions in a single school district. This study addressed the following central question:

How might freshman academies help students make the transition to high school in ways that are developmentally appropriate?

Guiding Research Questions:

- Does the stage-environment fit theory offer insight into the problems and solutions surrounding the transition from middle school to high school?
- What is the nature of the freshman academy?
- To what extent does the organization of the freshman academy help foster a developmentally appropriate learning environment?
- What transition elements do freshman academies implement?
- How do the perceptions of administrators and teachers influence the implementation of the freshman academy?
- How do students perceive their freshman academy experience?
- To what extent has the district been able to effectively implement small learning communities at the high school level?

Research in this area focuses on quantitative reports of the benefits of small learning communities, including freshman academies, and small case studies that briefly explain the basic tenets of a freshman academy. While these data are instructive, more in-depth qualitative studies are necessary to understand fully the complexities associated with helping students' make the transition to high school. Research in this area also lacks theory building case study examples that overtly describe how the freshman academy organizational structure might serve as a developmentally appropriate learning environment aiding the move to high school. Furthermore, there is scant research highlighting the voices of those intimately involved and how they attempt to create the freshman academy environment. Understanding the developmental aspects of freshman academies, how such developmentally appropriate practices are implemented, and how they help adolescent learners adjust to high school is essential if educators wish to keep students in school.

The present study focused on the application of stage-environment fit theory to an investigation of one Florida school district's attempt at implementing freshman academies in select schools within the district. Three schools within the district agreed to participate in the study. A total of 67 participants contributed to the present study, including school district personnel, site-based administrators, site-based small learning coordinators, freshman academy teachers, and freshman academy students. Data collection included 13 focus group interviews, 12 individual interviews, 22 observations, and archival data. The written presentation include one chapter on each of the following: introduction, review of the literature, methodology, findings from each school, cross-case analysis, and extension of literature and implications.

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the application of the stage-environment fit theory to the middle-to-high-school transition to gain insight into how the freshman academy might help students make the transition to high school in developmentally appropriate ways. Specifically, this study explored the nature of the freshman academy to better understand how it might help the transition process. To aid in the understanding and interpretation of the data, a detailed review of the literature was performed prior to, throughout, and after collecting data.

Developmentally Appropriate Schooling

The need for developmentally appropriate schooling has been well documented in the literature (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgley et al. 1993; Eccles, Wigfield et al., 1993; George & Alexander, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Small, family-like, interdisciplinary, heterogeneous, student-focused learning communities centering on socially and emotionally supporting adolescents and strong teacher-student relationships are favored (Cotton, 2001; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993; Eccles, Wigfield et al., 1993; Fields, 2005; George & Alexander, 2003; ICLE, 2004; NRCIM, 2004). Students in schools that are organized appropriately, with their developmental needs at the center, report experiencing fewer problems with school transitions, achieve higher grades, experience fewer negative shifts in motivational beliefs than students in schools organized in a more traditional manner (Anderman, Maehrer, & Midgley, 1999; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993; Eccles, Wigfield et al., 1993). Ultimately, students are likely to be more successful in schools organized with students' developmental needs at the forefront. However, many of today's high schools are

not organized with students' developmental needs in mind (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 1996).

In a study conducted by Willard Daggett (2004), America's top achieving high schools placed a strong developmental focus on ninth-grade students. Such schools have multiple ways of focusing on ninth graders, yet share a set of common characteristics. First, successful programs create a smooth transition from eighth to ninth grade. Second, exemplary ninth-grade programs establish open dialogues among middle and high school staff, students, and parents. Third, such programs personalize the ninth-grade year. Fourth, successful ninth-grade programs work to detect students at-risk of failure early. Fifth, great ninth-grade programs focus on instructional and organizational strategies that motivate students. Finally, such programs focus on reading and writing (Fields, 2005). Many successful ninth-grade programs take on the middle school learning community approach. This approach includes teaming, proximity, looping, and interdisciplinary teaching.

Stage-Environment Fit Theory

Both Jacquelynne Eccles and Carol Midgley are well-known researchers in the area of early adolescence. Much of Eccles and Midgley's work focused on motivation (Eccles et al., 1984; Eccles & Wigfield, 1985; Eccles, Wigfield et al., 1993), factors related to the elementary to junior high school transition (Feldlaufer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1988; Midgley, et al., 1991; Midgley, & Feldlaufer, 1987; Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989), the influences of family factors on adolescence (Buchanan, Eccles, & Becker, 1992), and the application of stage-environment fit theory to family relations and adolescent outcomes (Gutman & Eccles, 2007). Eccles and colleagues literature on the stage-environment fit theory applied to the elementary to junior high transition greatly influenced the present study (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgley et al. 1993). Eccles and Midgley's stage-environment fit research found that some

adolescents experience difficulty when moving from elementary school to a traditional junior high school environment, often resulting in a decline in motivation. They found that such declines in student motivation, furthermore, frequently led to serious academic and behavioral problems (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1984).

Two possible explanations exist for students' experience of a decline in motivation between elementary and junior high school. One explanation, offered by Higgins & Parsons (1983), focused on the systematic difference between a typical elementary school and a typical junior high school. As a result, it is probable that the differences in the classroom and school *environment* might account for some of the motivational changes that take place during the elementary to junior high transition (Higgins & Parsons, 1983).

The second explanation, Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory, stemmed from Hunt's (1975) person-environment fit perspective, which highlighted the importance of looking at the idea of person-environment interaction through a developmental lens. Hunt's person-environment fit perspective stressed that motivation would decline if the environment did not fit developmental needs. Thus, the school environment needed to provide an optimal level of structure for the characteristics of early adolescents, to help students move positively toward cognitive and affective maturity. Negative motivational outcomes occurred when the environment was not designed to match their needs (Hunt, 1975).

Eccles and Midgley expanded on this perspective to include school to school transition and school organization. They proposed that, if different age groups need different educational environments, then changes in educational environments during a certain developmental period might be inappropriate and counterproductive (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgley, & Lord, 1991; Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993). Eccles and Midgley believed it was the nature of the

school organization in which the transition occurred that might make the transition counterproductive. Simmons and Blyth (1987) had argued that the timing of the school-to-school transition produced negative outcomes that might be minimized if the transition occurred a few years later, when the child had developed a deeper sense of identity. Eccles and Midgley (1989) believed the *nature* of the transition not the *timing* made the school-to-school move difficult for young adolescents.

Any inconsistency between the developmental needs of students and the organizational environment, instruction, and school climate would likely produce negative outcomes (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993). Negative outcomes such as declines in achievement motivation, school attitude, self-perception, self-esteem, self-concept, subject matter interest, motivational beliefs, values, behaviors, self-management, and choice are all possible results of such inconsistencies (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993).

Recently, Barber & Olsen (2004) applied Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory to four different grade transitions, including two school to school transitions, to investigate the extent school environments affected youth functioning. Results from their study suggest that both decreases in the quality of school environments and youth functioning occurred at each transition, most profound during the sixth to seventh grade transition. Perceived levels of teacher support were noted to strongly affect student functioning.

Making the Move to High School

Each year approximately 4,191,000 public school students enter ninth grade (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2005).¹ While entering ninth graders are undergoing all the developmental changes associated with adolescence, many of these students are

¹ NCES (2005) based on the 2003 public school enrollment.

simultaneously experiencing the hardships associated with entering a new school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999; Queen, 2002). Many factors affect how students make the transition to high school. According to the SREB, “The passage of students from the middle grades to high school is the most difficult transition point in education” (2002, p. 24). While any school transition brings about new and important changes, undergoing the move to a new, larger school that may not meet students’ developmental needs during an already vulnerable time in their lives escalates the difficulty of the transition. The middle-to-high-school transition is known to be extremely hard for select groups of students. For these at-risk students, moving from middle-to-high-school is a particularly difficult task and often results in negative outcomes.

Large School Environment

As students advance to middle and high school, school environments become increasingly larger. High schools with over 900 students are classified as large high schools (Dejong & Locker, 2006; Raywid, 1999). By the 1970s, schools with many hundreds of students were commonplace and viewed by many as preferable to smaller schools because of their increased curricular opportunities and greater efficiency (Dejong & Locker, 2006). Today, over 70% of American high schools serve over 1,000 students, and 50% enroll over 1,500 students (Dejong & Locker, 2006; USDOE, 2007). More recent research on school size seems to suggest large high schools are not as effective as previously thought, proposing that smaller school environments might be better at meeting the needs of today’s students (Cotton, 1996, 2001; Williams, 1990).

As students move into larger middle and high school, their social and academic lives are greatly influenced by the transition (Schiller, 1999). High school is typically more impersonal and less socially supportive (Cotton, 2001; ICLE, 2005; Hertzog, as cited in Chute, 1999; Midgley, Eccles, & Feldlaufer, 1991; Queen, 2002), more competitive (Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984), and more heavily academic (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Traditional secondary school

educational environments emphasizing departmentalization, ability grouping, teacher-centered pedagogy, and strict student discipline and control may not meet the needs of all adolescents. Such schools may fail to foster a learning environment that recognizes the importance of relationships and the social aspect of teaching and learning (Dejong & Locker, 2006). These potentially inappropriate environments may produce a host of negative outcomes including decreases in attendance, academic performance, and motivation, as well as increases in disciplinary problems and students dropping out of school (Legters, 2000; Roderick & Camburn, 1996, 1999).

Ninth Grade Students

School transitions have been called “one of the defining parameters of development in the second decade of life” (Barber & Olsen, 2004, p. 3). Students that undergo the transition from middle to high school are in the midst of major physical, emotional, psychological, moral, social, and intellectual changes. This period of development is unique and difficult, and few adolescents develop at the same rate.

Understanding the period of human development from ages 11-19 has come a long way since G. Stanley Hall’s 1904 so-called deficit view, that adolescence is a phylogenetic period of time when humans move from “beast-like” to “civilized.” Many developmental theorists such as Jean Piaget, Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, Albert Bandura, and Lawrence Kohlberg have shaped our current understanding of adolescence. Today, we recognize adolescence as a vulnerable developmental period characterized by numerous dramatic changes beginning with puberty. Puberty marks the start of rapid physical growth, development of primary and secondary sex characteristics, increases in height and weight, dramatic increases in hormone levels, and heightened emotions. Simultaneously, adolescents also begin exploring social roles, morals, and values that help to define their identity. They begin to think more independently, logically,

abstractly, hypothetically, and metacognitively. Adolescents start thinking about and planning for their future. Students are faced with developing mature relationships with both male and female adults and classmates. Additionally, socialization and the establishment of peer groups are very important. During this time, social contexts and the need to belong to something have strong influences on students' behaviors.

Sense of Belonging

Upon entering high school, students are in the midst of adjusting to a new school and establishing a new social network. To help students develop a sense of belonging, educational settings can personalize the high school experience by creating a caring, fair, and educational environment that is student-focused. Motivation and engagement naturally increase and promote a sense of belonging when students believe they are able to make connections between themselves and the social context in which learning takes place (National Research Council Institute of Medicine [NRCIM], 2004). Educational environments can become more personalized and boost students' sense of belonging by heightening confidence in academic success, providing challenging yet supportive instructional opportunities, clearly communicating high expectations, involving students in the decision-making process, and helping to forge adult and peer relationships (NRCIM, 2004).

For most adolescents, establishing peer relationships is very important to developing a sense of belonging in school. Peer relationships are so important that students report close friendships as the most significant factor in helping them make the move from middle to high school (Hertzog, Morgan, Diamond, & Walker, 1996). Students report difficulties adjusting to high school life because their social networks are often disrupted during the middle-to-high-school transition. The disruption of their social network makes incoming ninth-grade students

more susceptible to harmful peer influences during the middle-to-high-school transition (Queen, 2002; Schiller, 1999).

When adolescents make the move from middle to high school, they not only report a decline in how they perceive themselves physically, but also become increasingly self-conscious (Hertzog, et al., 1996; Queen, 2002). As a result, students often seek out peer acceptance in inappropriate ways. It is important that high schools offer opportunities for incoming ninth graders to establish new, positive social networks and to work on developing a sense of belonging to their new school (Hertzog & Morgan 1998, 1999; NRCIM, 2004). Many students need support and guidance to remain on track and successfully complete high school. Unfortunately, many students report that high schools do not offer enough guidance and social support opportunities (Midgley, Eccles, & Feldlaufer, 1991).

At-Risk Students

The move to high school poses some degree of difficulty for almost every student. There are certain groups of adolescents placed at high risk by the combination of their personal and academic development and the nature of the high school organization. Such groups include: low socioeconomic students, minority students, male students, second language learners, transient students, older students, students with prior or continuing discipline problems, students not academically engaged in eighth grade, and students with disabilities (Gutman, & Midgley, 2000; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman, & Smith, 2000; Nield, Stoner-Eby, & Frank, 2001; Queen, 2002).² Queen (2002) reports additional signs that a student is at-risk of difficulty during the transition to high school: childhood attention problems, multiple grade retentions, low grades, frequent absenteeism, no connection to school, behavioral issues, low

² In 2005, minority students made up 41.3% of our nation's total student population (NCES, 2005) and 51.2% of Florida's school population.

self-confidence, and lack of future goals. African American male students reportedly have the most difficulty with the middle-to-high-school transition (Queen, 2002). Schools with a large percentage of at-risk students are typically lower socioeconomic, high-minority schools. Consequently, students in these schools are five to six times as likely to drop out of school as their wealthier counterparts (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2004; Laird, Lew, DeBell, & Chapman, 2006).

According to the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE), as many as 30-40% of incoming ninth graders are not prepared to do high school quality work and can be classified as at-risk (Fields, 2005). Identifying at-risk students that are likely to struggle with both the transition and high school academics is critical. Initiatives such as academic intervention strategies, literacy and mathematics initiatives, involving parents early, and a commitment to personalization and relationship building are all ways to help prevent ninth-grade failures (Fields, 2005).

Completing High School

It is commonly expected that entering freshmen will graduate from high school in four years. Unfortunately, this is not always the case with many ninth graders across the nation. According to the NCES, for the 2002-2003 school year, the nation's average freshman graduation rate (number of students graduating high school in four years) was 73%, ranging from 59.6% in the District of Columbia to 87% in New Jersey (Laird et al., 2006). This figure means that 23.1% of our nation's students were retained one or more years in high school.

Some might argue that the United States has a dropout pandemic. According to the NCES, data gathered from 1990-2001 revealed that as many as 544,000 students in grades 10-12 dropped out of high school in that year alone. Students ages 15-17 make up 42.5% of the nation's eventual dropouts (Laird et al., 2006) and 6% leave school by the tenth grade (Mizelle,

1999). From an economic and social perspective, dropping out of high school brings forth a number of possible negative outcomes including a lower median income, an increase in unemployment, an increase in health problems, and a disproportionately high percentage of our nation's inmate population (Laird, et al., 2006; Thornburgh, 2006).

The literature provides two different perspectives attempting to explain why students might drop out of school, the individual and the institutional perspectives (Rumberger, 2004). The individual perspective focuses on student individual characteristics including behaviors, attitudes, and values. The institutional perspective focuses on the social environment including families, communities, peers, and schools. The basic premise is that social environments shape attitudes and behaviors (Rumberger, 2004).

Specific to this study, the institutional perspective notes that schools may have substantial effects on achievement and dropout rates. Student composition, school resources, structural characteristics, and processes and practices are all ways schools influence dropout rates. Some studies have found that the social and academic climate and culture of a school foreshadow dropout rates (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Additionally, positive student-teacher relationships have been linked with a decrease in students dropping out of school (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Overall, a school's organizational environment and socio-emotional climate seem to make a difference in student achievement and school completion.

Characteristics of High School Reform

Attempts to reform America's high schools started as early as the 1930s, with the Eight Year Study. Since the Eight Year Study, many additional high school reform initiatives have been implemented. Currently, with pressure being placed on high schools to improve academic performance and better prepare students for the 21st century global economy, high school reform is once again popular. Educational reform is challenging work and multidimensional. High

school reform often requires changes in internal and external context, meaning, leadership, structure, culture, and teachers' work and lives (Fink, 2000).

High school reform is not easy. As stated by George, McEwin & Jenkins (2000), "It [high school reform] requires skill, commitment, and a willingness to *do* something, rather than just talk about it" (328). Fink (2000) proposes a multidimensional approach to high school reform. First, school and teacher contexts, both internal and external, are important to consider when instituting school reform. Internal context focuses on the school including its departments, students, and subjects. External context includes the school district, state department of education, national government, parents, and the local community.

Second, school reform must have a purpose that is clear and well understood. All stakeholders must have an understanding of where school reform is going and support its purpose. Third, effective school leadership is an essential ingredient in determining the school's purpose and in carrying out school reform. School reform often requires stable leadership that shares a common vision and creates opportunities for all stakeholders to be involved in the decision making process. Fourth, school reform that involves changing school structure focuses on modifying time, space, definition, responsibilities, and arrangement of roles. Many reform efforts focus on structural change but are often unorganized, unsupported, and die off quickly (Cuban, 1988, 1992). Fifth, changes in school culture are necessary for school reform to be long-lasting. Schein (1985) categorizes an organization's culture into behaviors that can be observed, principal values, philosophy, and climate. Others suggest school culture is simply values that are both shared and put into practice (Deal & Kennedy, 1983). Lastly, school reform often requires a change in teacher practices. Such changes in teacher practices have the potential to be viewed differently depending on his/her stage in the career-cycle (novice/veteran) and additional factors

such as burnout and self-perception. Therefore, it is necessary to look at both teachers' work and lives when planning to implement school reform.

The Middle to High School Transition

Although some reform efforts are restructuring the entire high school, many improvement efforts are paying particular attention to the transition to high school and the ninth-grade year (Fields, 2005; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999; ICLE, 2004; Kerr, 2002; Letgers & Kerr, 2001; Queen, 2002; SREB, 2002). The accumulating evidence indicates that the manner in which students make the transition from middle to high school predicts student success in ninth grade (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999) and, consequently, success or failure in the later years of high school and beyond. High schools with students' developmental needs at the forefront are thought to help students make a smoother transition and foster an environment where student success is possible.

Many students make the decision to complete or quit high school within the first weeks of ninth grade (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999). It appears that both the middle-to-high-school transition and the first weeks of high school are critical periods in students' academic and personal lives. A supportive middle school environment coupled with a solid transition program into a developmentally appropriate high school can help ease the middle to high school transition and keep students in school. A complete transition program involves students, school staff, and parents. High schools without support structures in place report a freshman retention rate as high as 40% (Morgan & Hertzog, 1997, as cited in Hertzog & Morgan, 1998). However, schools with comprehensive transition support structures in place report a decrease in student retention, higher student grades, and fewer students dropping out of school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Smith, 1997). Such positive results only occur when schools provide complete support. Despite these cautionary insights, most high schools appear to do very little to

help adolescents adjust to high school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999; Roderick & Camburn, 1996).

Small Learning Community

Researchers investigating small schools and secondary school reform seem to indicate that organizational reform efforts, such as small learning communities, are promising developmentally appropriate organizational structures for students at the high school level (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; Kerr, 2002; Letgers & Kerr, 2001; Sammon, 2007; SREB, 2002). The small learning community organizational intervention aims to improve high school education by creating small, individualized learning environments within a large school. Organizations such as the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) and Talent Development High School (TDHS) developed frameworks for implementing small learning communities to help improve the academic performance of students in large, comprehensive high schools. The focus is on subdividing large schools into smaller, more manageable self-sufficient units of teachers, students, and often, administrators. Small learning communities provide identity, autonomy, personalization, student-centered instruction, and greater accountability (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007; SREB, 2002; USDOE, 2001). There are many different types of small learning communities including academies, house plans, schools within a school, and magnet schools. The current study investigated one of the most common types of small learning communities—the freshman academy—also referred to in the literature as the freshman house. Although freshman academies do not adhere to the guidelines set forth by the National Career Academy Coalition (NCAC), it is commonly accepted to refer to this type of small learning community as an academy. For the sake of this research project, the term academy will be used to describe this unique type of small learning community for freshmen.

Freshman Academy

A freshman academy is thought to ease the high school transition by establishing a special, supportive environment for incoming ninth graders (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, 2005; Cushman, 2006; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; ICLE, 2004; James, 2001; Sammon, 2007; SREB, 2002; USDOE, 2001). Statements such as “intimate, cohesive environments” (Dejong & Locker, 2006) and “adjustment place” (ICLE, 2004) are often used to describe freshman academies. The intent of the freshman academy is to personalize the learning environment and high school experience around students’ developmental needs in an effort to help them successfully adjust and gain the skills necessary to complete high school (Cotton, 2001; CSRQC, 2005; Dejong & Locker, 2006; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Kerr, 2002; Kerr & Legters, 2004; Letgers & Kerr, 2001; Sammon, 2007; SREB, 2002; USDOE, 2001). Freshman academies plan activities that help students build connections to the school community. They organize events that aid in the middle to high school transition process. Freshman academies typically place students into small, student-teacher interdisciplinary teams, with team classrooms located in close proximity to each other, often in a separate wing of the school.

Teams share consistent rules, procedures, and intervention strategies. Teacher teams differentiate instruction, often create interdisciplinary lessons, and implement a student- and career-focused rigorous curriculum aimed at helping students achieve academic success in ninth grade and beyond. A freshman transition seminar/class is typically offered. Freshman academies incorporate mentoring and advisory programs. They typically arrange for freshman-only support personnel. Additional academic support services such as tutoring are offered. Freshman academies are designed to help students connect with their new school, be successful throughout their high school years, and graduate from high school. Many school districts are organizing ninth graders into freshman academies. For example, in 2004, the Philadelphia school system

implemented freshman academies in each of its 54 high schools with the main objective of helping students succeed in high school (Chmelynski, 2004). Additionally, during the 1999-2000 school year, approximately 25% of all Maryland's high schools implemented some form of small learning community, including schools-within-a-school and freshman academies (Kerr & Legters, 2004).

Small Learning Community Results

Although reducing the size of large, comprehensive high schools is not the universal remedy for secondary education, it may be an effective starting point that allows additional reform efforts to develop (Cotton, 2001; USDOE, 2001; Visher, Teitelbaum, & Emanuel, 1999). Research on the restructuring of large, comprehensive high schools into small learning communities is producing results similar to positive outcomes reported in the small school research without losing the benefits of the large high school model (Cotton, 2001; Dejong & Locker, 2006). Small learning communities, including freshman academies, report a number of benefits. Reported benefits include increases in academic achievement, motivation, belonging, autonomy, extracurricular participation, attendance, heterogeneity, connection to school community, student-centered curriculum, graduation rates, promotion, personalization, student, parent, and teacher satisfaction, school safety, and student behavior (Branigan, 2006; Chmelynski, 2004; Conrad, 2007; Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; Hendrix, 2007; ICLE, 2004; Kemple, Herlihy, & Smith, 2005; Kerr & Legters, 2004; Legters & Kerr, 2001; SREB, 2002). Recent research on self-contained freshman academies has revealed that students' school setting appears to have an impact on their academic success (Conrad, 2007).

While results from such school restructuring are positive overall, some reports show little difference. Based on research from Chicago's small school reform, attending restructured small high schools produced many benefits. Such benefits included higher attendance rates, lower

dropout rates, higher academic expectations, and a more personally and academically supportive environment. However, instructional practices did not differ from traditional comprehensive high schools and students attending small schools did not see significant differences in their scores on the state achievement exam (Kahne, Sporte, de la Torre, & Easton, 2006). Hendrix (2007) found little statistical difference in the number of credits earned and promotion rates of students in freshman academies from those not in freshman academies.

Small Learning Community Barriers

There are many reported obstacles to the use of the small learning community to support the high school reform process. At the center of the dilemma is the struggle to change the culture of America's high schools. As Cotton (2001) states, "So tenaciously do we hold onto the way we have experienced school that proposed change of any kind can provoke uproar" (p. 54). Many claim they want high schools that do a better job of educating adolescents but are unwilling to transform the culture in order for such change to take place. They have the mindset that, "we want schools that are better but not different" (Wasley & Lear, 2001, p. 24). Another barrier involves the level of implementation of small learning community and freshman academy structures. Cramer (2006) found that large high schools with moderate levels of implementation did not produce statistically significant differences in academic achievement, postsecondary education, and dropout rates than large, non-small learning community high schools. His study found that non-small learning community high schools achieved a larger increase in academic achievement than small learning community high schools. Additional small learning community barriers include school size, tracking, demands on staff, lack of classroom focus, scheduling, space limitations, staff relationships, rigidity of the standards' movement, laws and policies, professional development, staff buy-in, and the need for immediate results (Cotton, 2001, Wasley & Lear, 2001). It is important to note that high school change is a unified and systematic

process that is often difficult to differentiate to determine exactly what is producing results. Equally noteworthy, implementing small learning communities in a traditional high school means changing the culture of the school. The small learning community concept typically counters the culture of a large American high school. Such changes would require a substantial investment of time and complete dedication. School reform of this magnitude requires strong leadership with the foresight to implement effective and long-lasting school transformation.

Currently, there is a lack of research investigating the details of how schools are using freshman academies to help students make the transition to high school. Much of the past research is connected to quantitative measures of small learning community and freshman academy outcomes (Kemple & Herlihy, 2004; Kemple, et al., 2005; Kerr & Legters, 2004; Legters & Kerr, 2001; Philadelphia Education Fund, n.d.; Royer, 2007) and small case study reports on freshman academy successes (Baldwin, 2006; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2006; Kemple et al., 2005; Potter, 2004; SREB, 2002).

The *Talent Development High Schools* initiative, a federally assigned school reform model from Johns Hopkins University, is using a wide-range of approaches, including ninth-grade success academies, to improve student performance. Reports from the schools indicate great academic gains (Kemple et al., 2005). SREB's *High School's That Work* initiative provides small case study examples of schools within its network that are making great headway in smoothing the middle to high school transition. SREB (2002) reports case studies of four schools in Kentucky and Texas that implemented various support structures for incoming freshmen, including a case study of one school's freshman academy program for at-risk students. Baldwin (2006) conducted a qualitative case study that describes the implementation of small learning

communities in one North Carolina high school. Data collection methods included voices of pertinent school personnel, documents, and observations.

Springer-Schwatken (2004) conducted a quantitative study of a freshman academy in one large Kansas high school. Findings suggest that females experienced benefits such as a decrease in number of days suspended, unexcused absences, and aggressive acts. Springer-Schwatken (2004) findings also suggest that males, Caucasians, and Hispanics were negatively impacted by the implementation of the freshman academy. Potter's (2004) mixed method study of one freshman academy found that the freshman academy created a more personalized school experience, including increases in parental involvement, teacher collaboration, state assessment scores, and class participation.

Kerr (2002) conducted a mixed methods study that investigated the types of organizational practices schools are using to help students make the transition to high school and how schools differ in their implementation of such practices. Using both quantitative and qualitative measures, Kerr (2002) investigated one state's implementation of three types of organizational practices, including freshman academies. Observations and interviews at two urban high schools were conducted but a detailed analysis of each school was not provided.

The research discussed in this chapter suggests the freshman academy concept has substantial benefits. However, a detailed picture of exactly how the freshman academy may help students adjust to high school from the perspective of those most intimately involved is needed.

Kerr & Legters (2004) stated the following,

A more complete understanding of how schools are implementing practices would require visiting schools, talking to members of the school community, and comparing different modes of implementation in different contexts across a number of schools. Any argument to promote or scale up school-within-a-school organization or other reform practices should be based on a richer understanding of what is needed to achieve high-quality implementation.... (p. 20)

Therefore, the present study took an insider's look at the implementation of three freshman academies to gain insight on one of the reported benefits of the freshman academy—helping ninth-grade students make the transition to high school.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Perspective

This case study sought to apply the stage-environment fit theory to an investigation of one large school district's attempt at implementing freshman academies in three of its high schools. In this study, I explored the effect freshman academies had on helping students make the transition to high school. My interest in these components was framed using constructivism (Crotty, 1998; Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the stage-environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). These two perspectives can be found throughout this study, in its design, collection of data, analysis, and final presentation.

Constructivism

Paradigms provide researchers with a framework for their assumptions regarding research. Questions such as "what is the nature of reality," "what is the relationship of the knower to what is to be known," and "how is knowledge gained" shape one's research paradigm (Hatch, 2002, p. 11). My study was guided by a constructivist paradigm, one that assumes that many realities exist, each uniquely constructed by individuals through their interactions with the world around them (Hatch, 2002).

From the constructivist perspective, a world where a single absolute reality resides does not exist. In this paradigm, meanings are constructed by individuals as they connect with and interpret their surroundings. As subject and object interact, the interpretation of the interaction produces meaning (Crotty, 1998). Reality is formed from each subject's perspective, resulting in multiple, unique realities (Hatch, 2002). Epistemologically, constructivism is a highly subjective, interpretive perspective whereby truth is something that is agreed upon (Hatch, 2002). Together both researcher and participant work to co-create reality, making it difficult for the researcher to

remain objective. Admittedly hard to distinguish and often used synonymously, constructivism and constructionism do have slightly different meanings. Constructivism focuses on how individuals make meaning, whereas constructionism is more concerned with the collective understanding and diffusion of meaning, often focusing on the way cultures shapes one's view of reality (Crotty, 1998).

Constructivist data collection and analysis are conducted using naturalistic research methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data collection methods such as interviews and observations are conducted in their natural environment. Often, narratives or case studies are the final product of constructivist work (Hatch, 2002). According to Hatch, such products

...include enough contextual detail and sufficient representation of the voices of the participants that reader can place themselves in the shoes of the participants at some level and judge the quality of those findings based on criteria. (2002, p. 16)

This interpretive case study sought to understand school leaders, teachers, and students' perceptions of their freshman academy and how it might have helped students make the transition to high school.

Stage-Environment Fit Theory

Eccles and Midgely's (1989) work merges Hunt's (1975) person-environment fit perspective with school organization. They combine theory regarding individual psychological development with interactions in an institutional environment. In their stage-environment fit theory, Eccles and Midgley examined early adolescence and the elementary to the traditional junior high school transition in a search for a match between environmental factors based on one's developmental needs. The stage-environment fit theory proposes that changes in educational environments during certain developmental periods could result in negative outcomes if the environment did not match students' developmental needs (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgley, & Lord, 1991; Eccles, Midgley et al., 1993). Research by Eccles and

colleagues suggests that students may experience negative effects in classroom organizational, instructional, and climate variables if they enter into a developmentally inappropriate junior high school environment. Eccles and Midgley (1989) believed it was the nature of the school organization more than the timing in which the transition occurred that might make the transition counterproductive. They believed,

[The] nature of the transition has a substantial impact on the changes obtained in young adolescents' attitudes toward school, with a transition into a more traditional junior high school environment . . . leading to a more negative change. (1989, p. 143)

They thought a transition to a more supportive environment, even during an at-risk time, should result in a positive effect on student perceptions of themselves and their educational environment. Eccles and Midgley stated,

We also propose that a transition to a developmentally appropriate learning environment, even at this vulnerable age, could have a facilitative effect on young adolescents' beliefs and behaviors. (1989, p. 174)

Eccles and Midgely's (1989) stage-environment fit theory argues that school organization out to be adjusted to fit the developmental needs of students. As a result, it might be reasonable to predict that if stage-environment fit theory is valid, school reform efforts that focus on catering to the developmental needs of adolescents, such as small learning communities, would be one way to help improve the transition from middle to high school. My study sought to test the stage-environment fit theory at the middle to high school transition through a constructivist perspective. Perspectives of individuals and groups of individuals were gathered to determine how the implementation of the freshman academy environment might have helped students transition to high school in ways that were developmentally appropriate. Participants' reality of how freshman academies might ease the transition to high school is reflective throughout the present study.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the value and efficacy of stage-environment fit theory in documenting how freshman academies might help students in three large high schools in one Florida school district adjust to high school. According to Hatch (2002), a qualitative study of this nature must take place in its natural setting, incorporate the perspectives of participants and consist of many observations. Through interviews, focus groups, observations, and the examination of artifacts, I took an emic approach, the insider's view of what is happening, to paint a detailed picture of each freshman academy.

Case Study Research

Case studies examine a single entity or bounded system within its context, such as an innovative program (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Case study methodology is a favorable method for answering "how" questions (Yin, 2003), for looking at the interaction of characteristics among a phenomenon (Merriam, 1998), and for providing a holistic account and analysis of a bounded system (Stake, 1995). The intent of this research project was to apply Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory to investigate how the freshman academy, the bounded system in question, might help students make the transition to high school. Consequently, case study methodology was a logical method to use. Information of this type can aid the development and expansion of theory.

In multi-case studies, each case is analyzed individually and then analyzed across cases (Merriam, 1998). Yin (2003) believed multiple case studies are favorable to a single case study because they increase the ability to generalize. Generalization is favorable, as it adds to the substance of the study. Two studies noted as exemplary case studies, Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1983) multi-case study of six good high schools and Smulyan's (2000) multi-case study of three

women principals were used as design models when planning for and carrying out the my present study.

Case study research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon from an “inductive, hypothesis- or theory-generating mode of inquiry” (Merriam, 1998, p. 4). This interpretive multi-case study used a constructivist perspective in an attempt to expand on Eccles and Midgley’s stage-environment fit theory. Through the perceived realities of the participants, the study generated rich, thick descriptions of each freshman academy and its transitional elements. The study utilized Hatch’s (2002) inductive analysis method intended to reveal commonalities and differences among the cases.

Context of the Study

According to National Center of Educational Statistics, Florida’s high schools are the largest in the nation. During 2001-2002 school year, Florida averaged 1,565 students per high school, two times the national average (Hoffman, 2003). The large school district where this study took place is located in a socio-economically and ethnically diverse area of Southwest Florida representative of the overall state demographics (Table 3-1). The school district is comprised of a major urban metropolis and outlying suburban and rural towns. The school district is the eighth largest district in the nation, with 206 K-12 schools (133 elementary, 42 middle, 2 K-8, and 25 high schools plus 4 career centers) and a total student population over 190,000 students. Just over 11% of students report a primary language other than English, and 46.5% of students received price-reduced lunches.¹ The graduation rate is approximately 79.5%.²

¹ Provided by School District March 7, 2007

² USDOE Student Database, Survey 5 data March 7, 2006

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Title V, Part D, Subpart 4 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 7249) outlined the purpose and provided monies for small learning communities. Schools must have 1000 or more students to qualify for federal support. Funding could be used to study the viability of small learning communities, develop and implement small learning communities, provide professional development for faculty and staff, and establish ways to involve parents, local businesses and community organizations.

As of the 2006 fiscal year, 18 Florida school districts have received federal grant funding earmarked for the planning, implementation, or expansion of small learning communities including freshman academies/houses.³ During the 2002-2003 school year, the school district under study received a federally funded implementation grant totaling \$1,980,660 to put into operation small learning communities in four high schools. Each school expressed a need for a more personalized school experience for their high school. All three schools had a large student population and failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress as outlined by Florida's *No Child Left Behind* criteria stated in Florida's A+ Plan.⁴ Also, the school district received an additional year of funding to continue their small learning community initiatives through the 2006-2007 academic school year. The district's goals for implementing small learning communities were to increase student achievement, increase academic rigor and student retention, and improve school culture and climate. Among other things, the grant covered extensive professional development, the creation of two new small learning coordinator administrative positions (small learning community specialist and small learning community project manager), a ninth-grade lead teacher, and career academy lead teachers.

³ USDOE website, <http://slcprogram.ed.gov/cgi-bin/mysql/slcawards.cgi>

⁴ USDOE website, <http://www.ed.gov/programs/slcprogram/award.html>

Identification of Participants

In qualitative research, selection of participants is deliberate and purposeful (Patton, 2002). My study used criterion-based selection (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), also known as purposeful or purposive sampling (Merriam, 1998) to determine the cases. Cases were selected because I wanted to gain a deep understanding of particular phenomena. Because this study focused on understanding how freshman academies might help students make the transition to high school, high schools in the above-described Florida school district that met the following qualifications were asked to participate:

- Existing freshman academies were active
- Freshman academies had been in operation for at least two consecutive years
- Freshman academies were instituted under the same grant
- Freshman academies served a diverse student population of students
- Freshman academy personnel were willing to participate

The school district's director of vocational and technical training, the division that oversaw the small learning community grant, was asked to determine how many schools within the district met the above criteria. The principal of each school that met the above-mentioned criteria was asked to participate in the study. Three schools agreed to participate.

Forms of data collection included interviews, focus group interviews, observations, and archival collection. Each principal, site-based small learning community coordinator (specialist and/or project manager), freshman lead teacher, and the district level director were interviewed. A group of school leaders, freshman academy teachers, and ninth-grade students at each school participated in focus group interviews. A total of 67 participants were involved in this study. At each school, I conducted numerous ninth-grade classroom observations. I also sat in on a district level small learning community meeting. Additionally, archival data (e.g., small learning

community grant, mission statements, Keystone curriculum, professional development information, and team schedules) were collected.

Gaining Access

All University of Florida researchers must gain Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission before conducting human subject research. I submitted an IRB application, interview questions, focus group questions, informed consent, and student assent script to the University of Florida IRB. Upon IRB approval, I submitted copies of the abstract, the University of Florida IRB letter of approval, letters of consent, and student assent script to gain IRB approval from the individual school district. I was fingerprinted at the school district and directed to provide each school site with the district clearance form prior to collecting any data. All participants, including parents/guardians of the minor participants, signed informed consent forms (Appendix A). Students were read a student assent (Appendix B) and asked for verbal affirmation prior to participating.

Data Collection

The focus of qualitative case studies is on gathering as much information as possible about the case so the information can be properly analyzed and interpreted to further the development of relevant theory (Merriam, 1998). It is important to make sure all interpretations are grounded in the data. Additionally, multiple data sources are vital to this study. “Triangulation is mostly a process of repetitious data gathering and critical review of what is being said” (Stake, 2006, p. 34). In this study I sought to gain insight on how the freshman academy might help students make the transition to high school, by collecting and analyzing observations, interviews, focus group interviews, and archival data. I scheduled all observations, interviews, and focus group sessions in advance. I personally conducted each interview, focus group interview, and observation. Each participant was given a pseudonym to increase confidentiality. A data

management log was kept to track the dates and duration of each interview, focus group interview, and observation that took place (Table C-1). Additionally, I kept a log of each step taken in the data collection process.

Observations. Observations were conducted in freshman academy classrooms. I observed 22 classrooms, two teachers per freshman academy team at each school, for a total of 1065 minutes of class time; 77 pages of hand-written field notes were written (Table 3-2). Field notes such as these help add context and triangulate data while taking standard precautions to remain unobtrusive (Hatch, 2002). Such notes included descriptions of the classroom setting and the overall general classroom environment, issues not addressed in focus group interviews and/or interviews, and triangulation of interview and focus group data. These notes included as much concrete data as possible with no generalizations or personal interpretations. After each observation, personal reflections were recorded in a research journal.

Interviews. My study included 12 semi-structured interviews that lasted no more than 90 minutes each, totaling 126 pages of transcription (Table 3-3). An interview protocol was used to help guide the process (Appendix C). The school district small learning community director was interviewed to gain insight on the district level perspective. Each school principal, small learning community coordinator, and freshman lead teacher were interviewed at least one time to follow up on insights and issues emerging from the focus group interviews, classroom observations, and/or archival data. After I transcribed each interview, I asked the participant to read the transcription and check to make sure it captured what they were communicating, a process called member checking. Member checks were used for all interviews to help enhance trustworthiness. Additionally, examples of raw interview data were provided for the reader (Appendix D).

Focus group interviews. My study included 13 semi-structured focus group interviews that lasted no more than 90 minutes each, totaling 177 pages of transcription (Table 3-4). A protocol was used to help guide the interview (Appendix E). Focus groups aim to understand the perceptions of the participants involved in the situation under investigation—the freshman academy. Each school participated in a leadership focus group interview arranged by the site-based administrator. Additionally, all freshman academy teacher teams at each school (school A had three teams, school B had four teams, school C had four teams) were asked to participate in one open-ended, semi-structured interview protocol. Two teams at school A, three teams at school B, and two teams at school C participated in focus group interviews. Additionally, selected ninth-grade students at each school participated in one focus group using an open-ended semi-structured interview protocol. School leaders at each school site arranged for a group of students who demographically represented the ninth-grade student population to meet with me during the school day. A parental informed consent was required and a student assent script was used. I videotaped and transcribed all student focus groups sessions. Member checks were used for all teacher and leadership focus groups to help enhance the trustworthiness. Additionally, I provided the reader with examples of raw focus group data (Appendix F).

Archival collection. My study attempted to apply the stage-environment fit theory to investigate how freshman academies might help students adjust to high school. As a result, I collected materials such as mission statements, curriculum guidelines, team schedules, small learning community reports, and a copy of the grant. Archival evidence may help with triangulation of other data, helping to increase trustworthiness and consistency of the study.

Data Analysis

According to Hatch (2002), “data analysis is a systematic search for meaning” (p. 148). Data analysis helps to organize the often exhaustive amount of data collected in qualitative

research. In qualitative research, data analysis begins as soon as the first piece of datum is collected. In this study, once the initial piece of datum was collected, I attempted to derive meaning using Hatch's inductive approach to data analysis.

In a sense, all qualitative research is inductive, relying on thinking that moves from specific to general (Hatch, 2002). My study utilized Hatch's (2002) inductive approach to data analysis, whereby, through the process of looking for patterns in data, general statements regarding the phenomena were made. Theory, it is to be hoped, will emerge inductively from the phenomena within its context (Hatch, 2002).

Hatch's inductive analysis method was selected for four reasons. First, Hatch's analysis method, although similar to other methods (Spradley, 1979; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), was more flexible and known to work well in multiple qualitative paradigms, including constructivism (Hatch, 2002). Second, I was attempting to better understand perceptions embedded in the context of freshman academies. Inductive analysis afforded the possibility for participants' stories to emerge from the data collected. Third, an analysis method suitable for handling data with a relatively broad focus was needed. Lastly, an analysis method appropriate for handling a large data set was necessary. As Hatch (2002) stated,

The strength of inductive analysis is its power to get meaning from complex data that have been gathered with a broad focus in mind. It provides a systematic approach for processing large amounts of data in ways that allow researchers to feel confident that what they report is indeed representative of the social situations they are examining and/or the perspectives of participants they are studying. (p. 179)

For these reasons, Hatch's method of inductive analysis seemed to be the preferred analysis method to use for the present study.

Inductive analysis involves a series of steps beginning, first, with reading and rereading the data, to help gain a deeper understanding of the data. During this step, I separated the data into analyzable parts, referred to by Hatch (2002) as frames of analysis. The purpose for establishing

frames of analysis was to help place parameters on what data needed to be more carefully examined in later steps.

Second, data are read searching for pieces of datum that have a relationship with one another. This step helps to establish domains, categories of meaning, that reveal relationships characterized in the data (Hatch, 2002). According to Hatch (2002), “Domains are categories that can be expressed semantically” and are represented by “included terms” and “cover terms” (p. 165). Included terms are all the ideas that share a relationship with the cover term, the overarching category. The overarching categories or cover terms that emerged from the data included: sense of belonging to the school community, supportive and collaborative learning environment, freshman-focused teaching and learning, and culture of commitment to ninth-grade success. Some included terms from the above-listed cover terms were establishing connections early, staying connected, teacher to teacher communication, teacher support network, student-centered talk, Keystone, continuity between classes, selecting the right personnel, and professional development. These categories emerged through a process of reading and rereading the data within each frame in search of relationships among the data. Once a semantic relationship was established, I read each frame looking for an example of that relationship within the frame. I then created a domain sheet where the semantic relationship between the cover term and each included term was recorded.

Third, I decided which domains most clearly represented the intent of the study. Questions that guided the study were used to determine whether the domain was relevant to the study. These domains were coded and organized in outline format.

Fourth, the data were read and reread for the purpose of refining each domain and documenting where in the data examples of the relationship that make up each domain were

located. I used a coding system to help keep a record of where data excerpts were located within the data (Table 3-5).

Fifth, each domain was examined to make sure there were enough data to support it. I asked questions such as “is there enough data to support the existence of this domain in the setting being studied,” “are the data strong enough to make the case for including this domain,” and “are there other data that do not fit with or run counter to the relationships expressed in my domains” (Hatch, 2002, p. 170). During this step, I decided whether there was sufficient evidence to merit being included in each domain and searched for disconfirming evidence.

Sixth, I looked within each domain for new domains. By looking more deeply at the semantic relationship, included terms, and cover terms, I discovered better ways to organize each domain. During this step, I moved some included terms to a different domain, added two new included terms to an already existing domain, and subdivided one included term into two new included terms. The existing domain sheet was updated to reflect any changes made in this step (Appendix G).

Seventh, I looked for themes and connections among domains. I asked questions such as “what does all this mean,” “how does all this fit together,” and “how are the pieces related to the whole” (Hatch, 2002, p. 173). Personalizing the learning environment was the overarching theme that emerged from the data. Additionally, I looked for enough differences among the domains to justify having separate domains.

Eighth, a master outline showing the relationships in and across domains was created. The process of creating a master outline helped to uncover any elements that did not fit. It also helped to make sure that the theme represented all the data.

Lastly, all qualitative work includes pieces of data to support findings (Hatch, 2002). In this step, I selected excerpts from the data that supported the study's findings. Excerpts were coded. My peers critiqued the analysis to identify any inconsistencies, a process called peer review. Peer examination is intended to help enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

Methodological Issues

When conducting qualitative research, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability must be addressed to ensure the trustworthiness and quality of both the researcher and research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Equally important, researchers must also think about the limitations of the study (Hatch, 2000; Merriam, 1998). The following paragraphs elaborate on each of these methodological issues.

Credibility. Credibility can be defined as the research investigation's level of trustworthiness and the extent to which the findings describe an accurate picture of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Using multiple data sources to help triangulate findings is one way to ensure the findings are a true representation of reality and are convincing to the reader (Yin, 2003). In this study, I collected data from multiple sources including individual interviews, focus group interviews, observations, and archival evidence. Member checks were utilized for all interviews and focus group transcriptions (with exception of the student focus groups) to check for clarity and truthfulness. Additionally, the analysis was peer reviewed for rigor and accuracy.

Transferability. Yin (2003) defined transferability as the extension of research findings outside the initial scope of the case. Although a small qualitative case study is not generalizable, such a study can offer knowledge of the particular that can aid in the understanding of the general (Merriam, 1998). Merriam stated case studies could increase the likelihood of transferability by providing rich, thick descriptions; by elaborating on the study's typicality, how

similar the case is to other cases; and by conducting a multi-site design. My study addressed all of the above-mentioned strategies enhancing the transferability of its findings.

Dependability. Dependability relates to the extent the researcher describes the research process used to generate and interpret data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). An audit trail providing a clear indication of how data were analyzed and conclusions made is imperative in all qualitative research. I kept a journal that served as her audit trail throughout the data collection and analysis process. All decisions regarding the collection and analysis of data were recorded in this journal. Additionally, member checks helped to increase the dependability of this project.

Confirmability. Confirmability deals with the neutrality of research interpretations. Because the researcher is the key data collection instrument in qualitative research, it is important to document attempts made to ensure confirmability. Member checks and directly stating the researcher's qualifications and biases are two ways to increase confirmability in qualitative studies (Merriam, 1998). In order to aid in the confirmability of this research project, I explicitly stated my theoretical perspective and personal assumptions (Appendix H) and used member checks.

Limitations. My study applied the stage-environment fit theory to the middle to high school transition to investigate how the freshman academy might help students make the transition to high school, highlighting the perceptions of the administration, small learning community coordinators, teachers, and students involved with the freshman academy. My study did not include the perceptions of students not in the freshman academy, administrators not directly involved with the freshman academy, or teachers not teaching in the freshman academy. My study did not suggest that all freshman academies organize and operate as the three schools used in this study. Furthermore, my study did not suggest that all freshman academies produce

results similar to the three schools highlighted. Qualitative research is limited by its lack of representativeness (Merriam, 1998). Despite such limitations, this study did present a detailed picture of one large school districts implementation of three freshman academies by providing rich, thick descriptions and an inductive analysis that highlighted an overarching theme and supportive domains.

Convention of the Language

Because this qualitative research project combines the thoughts and actions of many people and interpretations of their words and actions, some explanations regarding language are necessary. Interviews, focus groups, observations, and archival data are presented in the past tense. The past tense is used because the data were gathered in the past. Participant voice is represented by using their exact words. Participant voice is either indented or in quotation marks followed by a code signifying the participant, school, type of data collection, and page number the piece of datum can be found in the transcript.

Presentations of Findings

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 begin by providing a detailed description of each school's organization and subculture. In addition to their organization and subculture, each chapter provides a detailed picture of each school's freshman academy structure using the aforementioned domains with selected excerpts from the data that support the findings. Excerpts are organized using the coding system found in Table 3-5. The following code, Alfg-p10, can be read as School A, leadership focus group, page 10. Chapter 7 presents a cross-case analysis of all three cases. The final chapter elaborates on the extension of Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory, positions research findings within the larger educational research framework, and addresses implications for future research.

Table 3-1. State and School District Demographics

	State Demographics [*] 2006-2007	School District Demographics ^{**} 2006-2007
White/non Hispanic	46.7%	48.8%
Black/non Hispanic	23.2%	23.6%
Hispanic	24.2%	22.5%
Asian Pacific Islander	2.3%	2.1%
American Indian/Alaskan native	0.3%	0.3%
Multiracial	3.3%	2.7%
Total minority	53.29%	51.2%
Eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch	46.8%	46.5%

*Data collected from FDOE website **Provided by School District. March 7, 2007

Table 3-2. Observational Time and Pages of Handwritten Notes

Participant	Logged Observational Time	Pages of Notes
Mrs. Cartright	90 minutes	3 pages
Ms. Potter	45 minutes	3 pages
Mr. Landry	45 minutes	4 pages
Mr. Coones	45 minutes	3 pages
Mrs. Franks	50 minutes	2 pages
Mr. Hubert	50 minutes	4 pages
Mrs. Honors	50 minutes	5 pages
Mrs. Matingly	50 minutes	2 pages
Ms. Froth	50 minutes	5 pages
Mrs. Kuhn	50 minutes	3 pages
Mrs. Matters	50 minutes	5 pages
Mr. Daud	50 minutes	3 pages
Mr. Benard	50 minutes	3 pages
Mrs. Samson & Mr. Wren	25 minutes	2 pages
Mr. Landry	25 minutes	3 pages
Mr. Jettings	50 minutes	4 pages
Ms. Bing & Mr. Wren	50 minutes	4 pages
Mrs. Rice	50 minutes	5 pages
Mr. Price	50 minutes	4 pages
Mr. Cunningham	45 minutes	4 pages
Mr. Ford	45 minutes	3 pages
Mrs. Smith	50 minutes	3 pages

Table 3-3. Interview Time and Pages Transcribed

Participant	Interview Time	Pages Transcribed
Mrs. Prado	57 minutes	14 pages
Mr. Bandery	16 minutes	4 pages
Mrs. Hillington	69 minutes	16 pages
Mrs. Hillington	40 minutes	9 pages
Mr. Benard	25 minutes	8 pages
Mr. Bandery	73 minutes	14 pages
Mrs. Cartright	25 minutes	7 pages
Mrs. Wilkinson	72 minutes	17 pages
Mr. Broadaway	37 minutes	9 pages
Ms. Nottings	84 minutes	16 pages
Mrs. Mauch	34 minutes	9 pages
Mr. Brommel	20 minutes	3 pages

Table 3-4. Focus Group Time and Pages Transcribed

Participant	Focus Group Time	Pages Transcribed
Dr. Ramell, Mr. Bandery & Mrs. Cartright	49 minutes	15 pages
Mr. Brommel, Mr. Hanes & Dr. Hawthaway	68 minutes	16 pages
Mrs. Matingly & Mr. Broadaway	84 minutes	25 pages
Mrs. Smith, Mr. Cruz, Ms. Simons & Ms. Kantry	24 minutes	8 pages
Mr. Cunningham & Mrs. Cartright	24 minutes	6 pages
Ms. Potter, Mrs. French & Ms. Kenny	34 minutes	12 pages
Mel, Sheryl, Carey, Elena, Ramon, Kody, KT, Andy & Eric	55 minutes	20 pages
Mr. George, Mr. Jettings & Mr. Hubert	45 minutes	13 pages
Mr. Kurts, Mrs. Honors & Miss Appleton	30 minutes	9 pages
Mika, Cameron, & Bruce	38 minutes	11 pages
Darren, Monica, Evan, Silvia, Samantha, Brigitte, Jesse, Katie & Kori	50 minutes	31 pages
Mrs. Rice, Ms. Froth, Mr. Quarte & Mrs. Porter	17 minutes	6 pages
Mr. Price & Mr. Daudry	13 minutes	5 pages

Table 3-5. Coding System

Freshman Academy	School A (A) School B (B) School C (C) School District (SD)
Data Source	Site-based Administrator Interview (ai) School District SLC Director interview (sdi) Site-based SLC Coordinator Interview (slcci,1-2) Freshman Lead Interview (fli) Classroom Observation (co) Teacher Focus Group team a-c (tfg,a-c) Leadership Focus Group (lfg) Student Focus Group (sfg) Archival (a)
Transcript Page(s)	Page(s) data comes from (-p)

CHAPTER 4 SCHOOL A

In Keystone I'd taken so many pictures of all the things they'd done in just one nine weeks I put it in a slide show. And at the end of the slide show I wrote a letter to them thanking them for inspiring me and, to me, it was just another letter. My kids were crying. They don't want it to end. They were hugging me and they were saying, "What am I going to do without Keystone?" And that's just one class. And I try to tell the kids, "This is what you did in just nine weeks. This is how you affected the school in just nine weeks. Imagine what you can accomplish in three nine weeks. In four years." And so, I think everybody needs to know that it works. If it's done properly, it is something that they'll remember forever and if you've got the right support at the school, it can be carried on for four years and it can change the atmosphere. It's changed the atmosphere.

–Mrs. Cartright, Afli-p6

Organization and Subculture

School A was a large, 50 year-old rural high school with a total school enrollment of approximately 1880, of which 469 were freshmen. As of the 2006-2007 school year, 50.53% of the student population was White, 27.16% was Hispanic, 15.35% was Black, 4.11% was multi-racial, 2.37% was Asian/Pacific Islander, and .47% was Indian.¹ Thirty-four percent of the student population qualified for free and reduced lunch. After School A received the grant, two new high schools opened in the surrounding areas, decreasing School A's student enrollment. At the time the grant was received, student enrollment was 2100 and 50% of all students qualified for free and reduced lunch. Throughout all four years of the small learning community grant (2003-2006), School A operated on a 90 minute 4x4 block schedule; however, for the 2007-2008 school year, the school district is moving to a district wide traditional eight-period day.

School A had a change in leadership during the four years of participating in the small learning community grant. During year three, the assistant principal was promoted to principal and a new assistant principal for curriculum was hired. The current principal was a teacher and administrator at School A for 24 years. Many faculty and staff graduated from School A. As

¹ Data gathered from School District Website

stated by Mrs. Mauch, principal of School A, “Many teachers are School A grads here. They come home. It’s like coming home” [Aai-p11]. School A also reported a very low teacher turnover rate.

During the 2002-2003 school year, faculty and staff decided to become a part of a federal small learning community grant the school district was preparing to submit. At that time, School A’s administration believed small learning communities could help their struggling student population, especially their ninth-grade population. Similar to other schools in this study, School A had a large student population and their students did not make adequately yearly progress for two consecutive years.² At the time of the grant, School A reported a graduation rate of approximately 71.8% a ninth-grade retention rate of 13.9% [School district objectives, Archival]. Faculty expressed an interest in establishing small learning communities, with a strong emphasis on their freshman population. As stated by Mr. Bandery, School A’s small learning community coordinator, “[T]he reason for getting the grant was we need to do something to help our freshmen succeed and to stay in school. They were dropping through the cracks like mad” [Mr. Bandery, Alfg-p6]. School A’s small learning community mission was to,

Offer a safe and successful academic environment focused on increasing student retention and accomplishment, providing abundant support for both students and faculty, and generate a sense of community and belonging for all. [SLC mission statement, Archival]

When School A applied for the small learning community grant, they already had experience operating an academy—an aquaculture academy. After receiving the grant, School A immediately implemented a freshman academy and began planning the following academies that will be in full operation for the 2007-2008 school year: Environmental Studies (formerly the aquaculture academy), Culinary Arts, Fine Arts, and Business Communications.

² The student population was 1800 students at the time the grant was written.

During the 2006-2007 school year, School A had three ninth-grade teams with at least one science, English, mathematics, social studies, and Keystone teacher per team. Additionally, elective teachers were also included on freshman teacher teams. Teachers on these teams shared a common planning period. At the beginning of the year, each team met biweekly to share common teaching strategies and to articulate issues or concerns regarding particular students. As the year progressed, and teams became more established, the teachers began to meet monthly. Because School A operated on a 4x4 block schedule, all freshmen took Keystone, the freshman transition course, during their first nine weeks of high school, along with three other classes. All classes, with very few exceptions, were taught by their team teachers.

School leadership planned on implementing proximity for all their small learning communities for the 2007-2008 school year but decided to hold off until all the communities were running smoothly. Proximity is when team classrooms are physically located close to one another. Currently ninth-grade transition team classrooms remain dispersed throughout the campus.

Administrators and guidance counselors at School A developed the master schedule so that student-teacher teams were pure and all teachers on a team shared a common planning period. Purity is the extent to which teams share common students. Up until this year, ninth-grade teams have not been pure. Administrators hand-scheduled many of School A's incoming ninth graders to assure that commonality was kept high, as they believed that teams with similar students and teachers was the cornerstone to a successful freshman academy. All three ninth-grade transition teams were about 90% to 95% pure during the first 18 weeks of school. After the first 18 weeks, commonality dropped some but still remained high.

During an interview, I asked students to describe their freshman academy and team. Responses indicated that although students recognized they had multiple classes with similar students, they were not aware of being part of a freshman team or academy.

R: If I was to ask you to describe your freshmen academy, what would you say?

EVAN: What's that?

BRIGETTE: Yeah, what's that?

R: What if I said describe your freshman team?

MONICA: Freshman team?

R: Umhmm. Do you know what I'm talking about?

MONICA: You mean freshman class?

KATIE: You mean our whole class? [Asfg-p13]

Students were unable to articulate any understanding of both their freshman academy and freshman team. Instead, students thought I was asking about their freshman student body.

The following paragraphs will elaborate on how the implementation of School A's freshman academy might help students make the transition to high school. The extent School A's freshman academy helped to establish a sense of belonging, a supportive environment, freshman-focused teaching and learning, and a culture of commitment to ninth-grade success will be discussed. Each domain highlights the voices of School A's administrators, teachers, and students.

Sense of Belonging to School Community

Helping incoming ninth graders make the transition to high school by providing them a sense of belonging and connection with faculty, staff, and students early and offering opportunities to stay connected is well documented in school transition literature (Cushman, 2006; Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; Mizelle, 2005; Osterman, 2000;

Queen, 2002). School A's freshman academy appeared to revolve around helping students get connected to both their new school and peers. Faculty and staff at School A did not wait until the first day of school to work on developing a sense of belonging; rather, they used both students' eighth-grade year and summertime to establish connections. Once school started, they utilized the first weeks of school to help students continue to develop connections. Programs and activities strategically designed to help students develop a deep sense of belonging and connection to both School A and their peers were implemented at the beginning of the school year.

Establishing Connections Early

School A's leadership team sought to help students develop a sense of belonging by establishing a working relationship with the faculty and staff at their feeder middle school and scheduling transition activities during their eighth-grade year. Events intended to help ease the transition process over the summer for both students and parents were also offered. Both a summer camp and a parent night were held prior to the beginning of the school year. Students and parents were able to tour the school, meet faculty, staff, and upperclassmen, and get answers to their questions about School A. The intent was to help ease any anxiety students had about entering high school prior to the first day of school and create a seamless transition from middle to high school.

...[T]his is the first year we're doing a lot of these transition processes...It's just exciting because it seems like some things we do we go back and look at, "Well, that wasn't quite a great idea." But most everything we're doing we're seeing some success. It's like, "Why didn't we do this before?" [Mr Bandery, Aslcci,2-p10]

Mrs. Mauch, principal of School A, believed their efforts to help students connect early paid off.

She stated, "They've seen School A. They're a part of School A" [Mrs. Mauch, Aai-p4].

Feeder Middle School

School A's feeder middle school borders the west side of their property, separated only by a side street. Over the past few years, faculty and staff from School A, along with their middle school colleagues, devised numerous transition activities such as school tours, talk sessions, and summer camp in an effort to help the transition process. During the student focus group interview, students mentioned going on a school tour while still in middle school, "In middle school they brought us over here, you know, like that at the end of eighth grade they took us here and they took us on a tour so that kind of helped us" [David, Asfg-p18].

Last year, School A's feeder middle school experienced a change in leadership. With their feeder middle school under new leadership, Mrs. Mauch and her leadership team forged a collaborative relationship with the new administration to continue to bridge the gap between both schools.

The open dialogue is the main thing that we've tried to establish now. We can e-mail over there and they can e-mail over here and talk to us about things and it's great because there's only a road separating the two schools. [Mr. Bandery, Aslcci,2-p5]

During a spring 2007 brainstorming session between leadership teams, a list of over two dozen new transition activities were discussed. Ideas included a summer dance where ninth graders would host the eighth graders, a tutoring program where current ninth graders could mentor eighth grade students, shadowing program, and a field day. Many of the ideas talked about were immediately planned and implemented. For example, at the end of the school year, incoming eighth graders were able to come over to the high school for a barbeque and football game. Additional ideas were in the process of being planned for the upcoming 2007-2008 school year. When I spoke with current ninth-grade students about their transition from middle to high school, one student expressed the desire to have a shadowing program for eighth graders.

Like at other schools, the eighth graders shadow a fellow ninth grader to show them around and be like, “this is lunchroom.” It would be like “if you want to get lunch you just do it at the very beginning or the very end. These are the senior tables. You don’t sit here. You sit at one of the long tables.” Kinda walk you through your day. They’ll show you the library, “Here are the computers. You shouldn’t do this. You should do this. This teacher will help you out. Go to him. This teacher won’t. Don’t ever go to him.” Like just saying like the basic needs that you have to figure out all by yourself. [Evan, Asfg-p24]

Summer Camp

For the past three years, faculty and staff at School A used summer break as an opportunity to invite incoming ninth graders to spend the day at School A. Summer camp was a time to help students acclimate to their new school surroundings, and get acquainted with faculty, staff, and students. Ninth-grade Keystone teachers ran the camp. Incoming students toured the school, participated in a scavenger hunt, watched a dress code fashion show, learned about clubs and extracurricular activities, and talked with various ninth-grade teachers about important issues for the first weeks of school.

The whole purpose of that day is that whenever they come into school the first day they’re comfortable with their surroundings. They know where they’re going. The goal for the last three years is students that come to this camp will not go through the experience that most freshmen do where they walk into the wrong class on the first day of school. They’re going to know where they’re going. They’re going to know who their teachers are and be familiar with the school. We’ve heard stories every year of students who go through this camp showing other freshmen where to go. [Mr. Bandery, Aslcci,2-p9-10]

Parent Night

Separate from the traditional district-wide freshman open house, parent night was a time for parents to get acquainted informally with School A. The 2006-2007 school year was the first year School A hosted a parent night. Parents toured the facility, met faculty and staff, learned about pertinent school policies, met with coaches, and picked up their child’s informal schedule. Over 350 people attended parent night, including parents, students, and siblings. Due to its success, plans were discussed to have a more formalized parent night in future years.

We were planning on having about 50 parents show up. We had 354 people show up including parents, students, and siblings. We were standing room only in the auditorium and we have a large auditorium. We were shocked. So this year we're putting a lot more effort into that night. In fact, we're no longer required to do this for the grant but we've had so much success with it we're doing it anyway. [Mr. Bandery, Aslcci, 2-p10]

Throughout the student focus group interview, students mentioned the importance of not "looking like a freshman" when they arrived at School A. To them, this meant getting prepared, knowing their way around school, and understanding the student culture prior to the first day of school. Students mentioned taking a teacher-directed tour of the school; however, no student specifically made reference to summer camp or parent night, two of the major events that were intended to help students acclimate themselves to and learn their way around School A. Despite taking a school tour, students mentioned that they did not know what to do or where to go during their first days, "I took the tour and I still didn't know where I was going" [Monica, Asfg-p27]. Students believed the school tour might have been more beneficial if upperclassmen, rather than teachers, gave the tour.

MONICA: ... I think it would be better described by the people that go there.

SILVIA: Yeah, it would be better if a student helped you with that.

JESSE: When they gave us the tour, I didn't even know they had a cafeteria. I thought it was just vending machines because that's all I saw... They didn't even say, "Okay, this is where you get your food. This is the snack lines. These are the regular lines."

KATIE: All you eat is vending machines? I was like...

EVAN: But there's a difference between a teacher showing you around and a student touring you around. The teacher will go, "This is the hall between the gym and drama."

SILVIA: Yeah, because the teachers say what is important to them and students say what is important to them, you know, it's different.

SAMANTHA: Students go by the experience where teachers are just like, "Oh yeah, this is the hallway." [Asfg-p27]

Students expressed the need to have a better understanding of School A's student culture and unspoken rules. For example, one student wished he knew where to sit in the cafeteria on the first day of school. They believed upperclassmen would be more knowledgeable of such things.

Staying Connected

School A had many avenues to continue to build students' sense belonging. Once school officially began, faculty and staff at School A helped to build student connections by focusing intensely on the first weeks of school, uniting freshmen as a group, promoting involvement in extracurricular activities and electives, and encouraging school spirit.

Intense Focus on the First Weeks of School

During the student focus group, students mentioned trying to acclimate themselves to their new school surroundings and figure out where they fit in during the first weeks of school. Many students expressed that, while they were excited about coming to high school, they knew they were the bottom of the four classes and were not sure where they fit in. Many reported that ninth grade reminded them of their sixth-grade experience.

[L]ast year we were treated like the seniors. This year we come here and it's just like, "Okay, we back at the bottom." It's just like sixth grade again but that's what it feels like.
[Katie, Asfg-p23]

It was hard for students' to move from middle school where, as eighth graders, they were the top class to high school where they were perceived to be the bottom class. Students talked about being younger and much smaller than their upperclassman peers. They worried about being bullied and sitting at the wrong lunch table. Students believed they were lost in among the upperclassman student culture.

We felt like, I don't know, 'cause there was all these huge people we don't know and there's like my little group of friends and all of a sudden there's like these giant Joe Blows screaming 2007 and I didn't know what 2007 meant. I'm like, "It's only 2006." Sorry.
[Evan, Asfg-p8]

Students believed it was hard to acclimate and develop a connection to their new school, new teachers, and upperclassman students.

Out of all the freshman academy structures, the freshman transition class, Keystone, reportedly helped freshmen make the transition to and develop a sense of belonging to School A.

It's critical for their transition. It's to make the kids feel like they are not a small fish in a huge pond. . . . It's about transition. It's about getting kids from the get-go in the right mind set to be here and it's a hard mind set to break. [Mrs. Cartright, Alfg-p10]

Keystone teachers spoke of establishing a safe atmosphere where freshman-focused issues and concerns were discussed. The Keystone curriculum was set up to spend the first weeks of school focusing on helping students familiarize themselves with their new school community. Students learned the layout of the school, where to go for help, the history of School A, school traditions, and how to get involved in school clubs and organizations. Every student expressed the opinion that the course helped them adjust to and become part of School A. Also, students mentioned being comfortable talking with their Keystone teacher. Because of this comfort level, students reported going to their Keystone teacher during the first weeks of school when they were lost or nervous about something. Teachers spoke of instances where students would stop by the teacher's room, after Keystone was over, to give them a hug and express how much they missed their class. Solid teacher-student and student-student relationships seemed to form during Keystone. Overall, students reported enjoying Keystone.

R: What did you all think about the course?

SILVIA: I thought it was good.

BRITTANY: I thought it was fun.

MONICA: It helped us a lot.

EVAN: Like a lot.

KORI: Yeah, it did. [Asfg-p10]

Keystone was also used as an avenue to help get students involved in extracurricular activities. School A's faculty and staff believed it was important for students get involved in extracurricular activities and elective programs.

In high school, in a typical high school environment, unless they get plugged into a strong electives program or plugged into a club environment, the only place they get that is their groups, gangs, or friends. And if they don't have a group of friends or anything like that, that's where we lose so many of them. [Mrs. Bandery, Aslcci,2-p9]

Coaches, club sponsors, and elective teachers talked to every Keystone class about their program and answered any questions students presented. Faculty and staff believed Keystone was instrumental in getting freshmen involved in extracurricular activities and elective programs. They thought immediate opportunities for student extracurricular involvement gave students more of a reason to come to school. Students also expressed the need to get involved in an extracurricular activity as it helped them to get to know upperclassmen, be seen as an equal, and learn how to work as a team.

BRIGETTE: Like half the soccer team was juniors and sophomores and us getting to know them got us introduced to all kinds of other juniors and sophomores.

SAMANTHA: And it also helps you to learn like team work, to work with other people and don't be afraid. You're the one that has to go to them because they're not going to come to you.

EVAN: 'Cause like when you're on a team, everybody's equal. There's no freshman and seniors, this or that. It's just that I have to play on the same field as you so it gets us talking to the seniors. [Asfg-p25]

Uniting Freshmen

Faculty and staff at School A spoke to the importance of establishing a positive climate where students looked beyond their differences to find similarities that united them as a group.

[T]hey identify themselves as a group of freshmen, not as, "Well, I'm alternative and I'm punk and I'm prep." So student culture, because of what we've done this year, I think has become very cohesive. They recognize themselves not as different cultural groups, African American, White, Hispanic, but as "Oh, I'm freshman, sophomore, junior, senior." That's been a really cool thing to witness. [Mrs. Cartright, Alfg-p1]

Keystone appeared to be the foundation to helping students unite and develop a sense of group identity. As Mr. Bandery stated, “This [freshman academy] takes every student and gives them a place of their own” [Mr. Bandery, Aslcci,2-p9]. This year’s Keystone classes focused on fostering a safe, freshman-only learning environment where students were comfortable enough to develop relationships with one another and unite as a group. In Keystone, students reported discussing issues such as bullying and being a part of a positive social group. Administrators and teachers alike spoke of how hard Keystone teachers worked to develop personal relationships with their students. Reportedly, their goal was to help increase students’ sense of safety and comfort enough to want to be a part of School A’s community.

I think if anything else came out of that Keystone, it was that they were truly part of the school and they weren’t going to get pushed around by the big kids, and that was very important to us that we got that across to them. Get them to go to a football game. Freshmen don’t do that, because they’re afraid. But I think we united them as a group to allow them to be comfortable doing that kind of stuff. I think that was the biggest thing we did. Made them proud to be at School A and everything else comes into place. You know, the rigor, relevance, and relationships piece, we gave them the relationships piece. [Mrs. Mauch, Aai-p5-6]

An enormous sense of school spirit and class pride appears to have emerged from the focus on uniting ninth graders. In Keystone, students were taught about pep rallies and even participated in a mock freshmen-only pep rally. For the first pep rally, they also made freshman class tee-shirts and school spirit posters. School personnel reported that School A has not always had an enormous amount of school spirit. In the past, it was reported that students were not encouraged to get to know and become an integral part of School A. Since the implementation of small learning communities, school pride has allegedly increased tremendously.

My experience the first three years here there wasn’t a lot of school spirit because there wasn’t a lot encouraging the students to get to know the school and become part of the community and that’s changed. It’s a night and day difference now. There is a community, a real community concept here. [Mr. Bandery, Aai-p6]

Freshmen who were interviewed seemed excited about and proud to be a member of School A. During focus group and individual interviews, numerous faculty and staff spoke of how much spirit their freshman class had. For example, many reminisced about the very first pep rally of the school year where the freshman class straightforwardly challenged the senior class during a school spirit competition and won.

School spirit also seemed to positively affect academics. During an interview, Mrs. Mauch shared a recent conversation she had with a group of ninth graders after the Florida Writes exam.

Our writes scores started to come out and we started ‘rah rahing’ our tenth graders and the freshmen were like, “You ain’t seen nothing yet, Miss. You think these tenth graders are good? Wait until you see us as tenth graders.” So there’s been a lot of that kind of stuff.
[Mrs. Mauch, Aai-p7]

It seemed the focus on school spirit created a healthier, academically competitive atmosphere as each grade strived to be the ‘smartest grade’ at School A.

Faculty and staff at School A appeared to help their freshmen adjust to high school life on a social level. By uniting freshmen as a group, encouraging them to develop relationships with one another, get involved with extracurricular activities, and develop school spirit, students reportedly had an easier time becoming an active part of the school community. Keystone also appeared to play an integral part in helping freshmen develop a sense of belonging to their new school community.

Supportive and Collaborative Learning Environment

A supportive learning environment with constant communication among all involved stakeholders is essential in order for small learning communities, including freshman academies, to work effectively (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007). Over the past four years, the implementation of small learning communities is reported to have increased teacher-to-teacher communication and student-centered talk. Teachers from different departments

seemed to find benefit in talking to one another, even if they did not share similar students. Additionally, through Keystone and peer mentoring, students were afforded opportunities to collaborate and develop a support network.

Teacher to Teacher Communication

Prior to the establishment of small learning communities at School A, subject area departmentalization isolated groups of teachers from one another. Teachers reported knowing colleagues in their discipline, but not the other 100+ teachers at School A. As School A began to organize into communities of teachers from various disciplines, teachers began to communicate with fellow faculty members from other academic areas, producing what appears to have been a shift in the work climate at School A.

I saw this year a teacher who had been here for ten years and a teacher in a different department for twenty years meet for the first time (chuckles) and I see teachers now quite frequently talking, whether it's just talking or talking about students, but talking in the halls and that's the climate shift that we're looking for and beginning to see. [Mr. Bandery, Alfg-p8-9]

Administrators at School A never officially organized team classrooms in close proximity to one another. Although not organized by teams, teachers from almost every discipline were spread throughout the various wings of School A's campus (science was mostly located in one wing). During my time at School A, I witnessed numerous teachers standing in the hallway of their wings between periods conversing with fellow teachers about what they were doing in their classrooms and about shared students. Mr. Ramell, School A's assistant principal, reinforced what I witnessed during my time at School A. He mentioned that during the class change he frequently heard teachers talk to one other about cross-curricular items and what was going on in their classes.

Student-Centered Talk

Working together as a teacher team seemed to produce benefits for both teachers and students. One positive outcome was the increase in student-centered talk. Many conversations I had with school personnel focused on the importance of giving individualized attention to each student. Teachers believed the freshman academy made it easier to provide more individualized attention to all students, especially those in need of extra help. Common team planning periods and biweekly meetings provided teacher teams with opportunities to communicate about students. Despite such opportunities, Mr. Bandery, School A's small learning community coordinator, emphasized that the teaming structure was only as good as the extent teachers on a team actually met and collaborated with one another.

Teachers reported that the meetings were often about academic concerns, although behavioral issues were also discussed. For each meeting, teachers would typically bring a list of the students they wanted to discuss with the team. Half of each team meeting was reserved to talk about students.

The teachers would come with a list of students they wanted to talk about so when we get to that point we'd just do a round table and the teacher would start going through a list. How's this person doing? Is that person doing better? The coaches that we have would sit there and say, "Is Zach doing better for you because I talked to him?" "Oh, yeah, he's doing better, much better." [Mr. Bandery, Aslcci,2-p7]

No formal academic plan for handling student issues was created; rather, teachers handled each case on an individualized, informal basis. Teachers spoke often of bringing a situation with a particular student to their team meeting to elicit feedback from their colleagues.

One of the great things about the team concept, usually without exception, one of the teachers forms a bond with the student. So whenever other teachers are struggling or there's a personality conflict or whatever, there's one teacher on the team that can say, "Okay, I'll deal with it." [Mr. Bandery, Aslcci,2-p7]

Ultimately, they believed students benefited from teachers meeting and holding conversations about student learning. Because teachers met to talk about students, they seemed more likely to approach students about their progress in another class.

MS. POTTER: ...[I]f we come to our team meetings every other week and we say, “Hey Johnny’s having problems in my class.” “What’s going on?” We would go back and his homeroom teacher would say, “Hey, Ms. Potter said you’re not doing so hot in her computer class. What’s going on?” And it was that, “How’d you hear that? What?”

MS. KENNY: We still do that.

MS. POTTER: And we still do that. Right. They’re like, “How do you know that?” So the team as far as from that, definitely, the structure of the teams was very nice in that aspect. [Atfg,b-p3]

During the student focus group, students made no references that indicated they were aware teachers met to talk about student progress or discuss student needs. They did mention instances when individual teachers approached them about their academic progress in other classes and said they would speak to another teacher on their behalf.

Teaming also appears to have helped teachers collaborate about teaching methods. Team meetings provided an opportunity for teachers to brainstorm teaching strategies they wanted to implement in their classrooms to meet the academic needs of their students.

...[T]his [teaming] has helped me with a few individual students through our meetings at the beginning of the year saying, “Okay, you have this kid.” “Yes, I do.” “This kid’s not doing well in my class.” “This works.” Whereas, if we did not have that group meeting, I might have let that kid slip through the cracks... [Mr. Cunningham, Atfg,a-p3]

Teachers expressed that as FCAT approached, they met less and the benefits previously mentioned began to dwindle. Some teachers believed more teacher accountability would have helped the bi-weekly meetings continue.

Student Support Programs

School A had two programs set up to support students—Keystone and peer mentors. Both Keystone and the newly formed peer mentor program were intended to support students and

encourage collaboration. Unfortunately, the peer mentor program seems to have lost momentum during the first semester.

Keystone as Advisory

Most Keystone teachers appear to have developed a deep connection with their students. As a result, many Keystone teachers assumed the role of advisor and spokesperson for their students. It was reported that Keystone teachers spent a great deal of time talking with students about things that would typically be covered in advisory.

The Keystone teachers are acting as advisors, very much in the sense of the advisor is helping students decide what they are going to do in the future. The Keystone teachers are the ones where the different academy people come into the classes and present about the academies so the Keystone teachers are there with the students helping them pick academies, things like that. So in a sense and it's a large class, a full class of twenty-five students, but in a sense they are advisors. [Mr. Bandery, Aslcci,2-p1-2]

Some Keystone teachers, even after the class was complete, allegedly still carried on the role of mentoring students, keeping them focused on school, and serving as their adult advocate when necessary.

I see these teachers [Keystone teachers] in the hall keeping the transition going. Keeping them forward thinking. Keep reminding about their grades, "How are your grades? What do you mean you've got a D? Well, I'm going to go talk to your teacher. That's not quite right. Are you not doing your work? Do I need to call home?" [Mrs. Cartright, Afli-p1]

To date, School A does not have a formal ninth-grade advisory. It is planned that upperclassmen will have a formal advisory within their small learning communities for the 2007-2008 school year.

Peer Mentors

During the 2006-2007 school year, a recently graduated senior came up with the idea of implementing a student-operated senior-freshman mentor club. At the beginning of the year, approximately 150 students signed up to be a part of the club. Reportedly, the program was initially successful, but slowly disintegrated due to the lack of supervision. During the leadership

focus group interview, School A's assistant principal, small learning community coordinator, and freshman lead teacher expressed the desire to revive the program for future years.

Additionally, although not currently implemented, School A was in the process of planning a Peer Mediation II program made up of sophomores who successfully completed both Keystone and their freshman year of school. Hand-selected by the freshman lead teacher, these students would work with their feeder middle school's eighth-grade students to help them make a solid transition to School A. This program was in line to begin during the 2007-2008 school year.

Freshman-Focused Teaching and Learning

Freshman academies are noted to offer a unique teaching and learning experience. Freshman academies focus on the use of common instructional strategies, cross-curriculum integration, a multitude of teaching methods, and curriculum strategically designed to help students successfully make the transition to high school (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007). During April and May 2007, I observed two classrooms per team at School A, for a total of six classroom observations. A variety of teaching strategies were witnessed, including review games, teacher-directed seatwork, lecture, bookwork, practice AP testing, and an application-based student project [Classroom observations, 4-30-07, 5-10-07]. Both student-centered and teacher-directed teaching methods were observed. Teachers at School A expressed the belief that the freshman academy really did not alter their teaching methods, or the way students learned, as much as they would have preferred. Teachers mentioned they were working on ways to focus more intensely on the teaching and learning aspect of their freshman academy as they believed this aspect was lacking in their current program.

When teachers were asked what they currently do to tailor instruction to ninth-grade students, numerous conversations revolved around how they thought Keystone did a good job of focusing on the tools students needed to be successful in high school. Teaming was also

mentioned as positively contributing to increased continuity of teaching practices among teacher teams. Additionally, numerous incentive-based programs to help encourage students to do well in school were mentioned.

Freshman Transition Course

At School A, Keystone was a nine-week half-credit elective course designed to help students learn about their new school, establish goals and follow through, learn and apply communication skills, work effectively in a team, and practice leadership skills [School A Keystone syllabus, Archival]. The Keystone curriculum was originally designed by a group of school district personnel, with units on school ties, leadership and teamwork, discovering you, academic skills, goals and time management, career awareness, decision making, communication, and interpersonal skills [Keystone curriculum resource guide, Archival]. As with every school in this study, School A adapted the curriculum to meet the needs of their students. Most of School A's Keystone curriculum came from Sean Covey's, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* (1998), also part of the school district's course curriculum. Using this book, School A's keystone course was organized into the following units: "first days," "be proactive," "begin with the end in mind," "put first things first," "think win-win," "seek first to understand, then to be understood," "synergize," "sharpen the saw," and "keep hope alive" [Keystone daily agenda, Archival]. Keystone was used to focus intensely on helping students become part of the school community and be successful in high school. Students learned how to develop school spirit, will power, organizational skills, good listening skills, personal development skills, and ways to be successful in high school and life. During their focus group interview, students explained what they learned in Keystone.

JESSE: A class that helps you with life adjustments. First she taught us the school. Then being prepared for life and stuff like that. Different ways, like being proactive and reactive.

EVAN: Synergize.

MULTIPLE STUDENTS: Synergize (laughter)

MONICA: It like teaches you ways of reacting and how to better prepare yourself and how to like make yourself healthier and not

R: Such as how?

MONICA: Um, sharpen the saw.

R: What does that mean? (laughter)

MONICA: Like, instead of going to bed really late, go to bed early so you can wake up and you're all refreshed in the morning. [Asfg-p10]

Students spoke fondly of how Keystone helped prepare them to be successful in their high school classes.

I remember in Mrs. Cartright's class, in Keytone, she taught us how to take notes when the teacher's talking. She taught us how to take notes when we're reading something or stuff like that. So I think that helps us a lot. [Silvia, Asfg-p29]

Unique to this class, Keystone was made up of a heterogeneous group of ninth-grade students. Teachers reported the benefits of having a freshman-only, heterogeneous class. Because of Keystone, students of different academic abilities had the opportunity to get to know and work with students they might otherwise not be in the same class with.

...[I]t was neat to watch AP kids help lower level students achieve and pair and group up with them. That was really cool. That was probably one of the best things I noticed about my classes. [Mrs. Cartright, Alfg-p13]

Students believed that, in Keystone, they were able to be themselves while learning important skills to be successful in school and beyond.

SAMANTHA: It helped to have a class that you could just like relax in and like be yourself in and have fun but it also like teaches you things. [Asfg-p10]

Each freshman developed a portfolio of class assignments that were completed in Keystone. The following five assignments became part of every freshman student's portfolio: five year plan, writing sample, time management assignment, short and mid-term goals, and a

success lab activity [Keystone portfolio requirements, Archival]. School A's success lab was a computer lab designated for college and career planning. As part of the Keystone curriculum, students worked with the success lab instructors on college and career planning. Each student received a folder with a 'Class of 2010' sticker on it. All portfolio work was placed in this folder and collected at the conclusion of Keystone, to be distributed to each student's selected academy at the end of the school year; the portfolio would become part of their career academy records.

Keystone was also used to help inform students about the importance of FCAT and its effect on both students' lives and the school's grade. Students' input regarding what was needed to help students perform better on the FCAT was solicited in Keystone classes. During the weeks prior to FCAT, many teachers spoke of revisiting Keystone concepts with students to help prepare them for the upcoming test.

The efforts of School A's educators to develop a strong, socially supportive Keystone class, became the core of their entire freshman academy experience. On several occasions, Keystone was referred to as being *the* freshman academy.

R: How about maybe the way that freshman academy has helped these kids adjust to high school?

MR. CUNNINGHAM: See, I don't really know what you guys did in Keystone. I mean I know, just through what they said you guys... [Atfg,a-p3]

After the first nine-week quarter was completed and Keystone came to an end, teachers reported releasing their freshmen, with the hope that students would carry over what they had learned. Keystone teachers believed they sent the message that, "Its time for you to fly by yourself" [Mrs. Cartright, Afli-p6] and "Ok, now you're done. Go out there in high school" [Mrs. Potter, Atfg,b-p6]. Some Keystone teachers expressed that students might not be completely ready for that release.

MS. POTTER: ...I think the reason we've seen the drop off second and third nine weeks was because we did not have, it's almost like they went through nine weeks of boot camp.

MRS. FRENCH: Umhmm.

MS. POTTER: On them, on them, on them, on them and then all of a sudden the second nine weeks they were no longer in that and they just dropped off because we didn't even have weekly follow up in homerooms. [Atfg,b-p5]

Students appeared to retain much of what they learned in Keystone. Teachers stated that, although the ninth-grade overall grade point average (GPA) did drop, their GPA remained the highest class GPA in the school for the second nine-week grading period and school spirit and freshman pride remained strong.

Continuity Between Classes

Teaming and common planning time reportedly created opportunities for increased collaboration among teachers who shared similar students. Teachers reported being able to share different strategies for teaching and reaching individual students, share common teaching methods, and discuss their schedules. The freshman academy teaming structure afforded time for teachers to collaborate and focus on the students who were struggling academically. Teachers spoke of sharing insights on how best to help struggling students within the team during their common planning meetings. Regarding teaching methods, teachers mentioned reinforcing common strategies such as reading and note taking, taking an active role in knowing what was going on in other team teachers' classrooms, and checking up on students' progress in other classes. Additionally, because teachers knew their teammates' weekly agendas, teachers reported being able to adjust their course work to better balance students' workloads.

I'm going to try not to overburden them, especially when I have the honors. I say, "Alright guys. I need to know so I'll be able to plan for testing or quizzing so that way you won't be so in overload." Especially that first term with them coming in and trying to get orientated to how we do things. [Mrs. French, Atfg,b-p4]

Although teachers expressed interest in correlating instruction, they believed that lack of time and block scheduling made it difficult to implement cross curriculum activities. Some teachers openly expressed their attempts to reinforce and correlate curriculum with other team teachers.

MRS. CARTRIGHT: ...[W]e attempted for like two weeks to say, each teacher would write down what they were teaching for the next two weeks and we'd pass that around. So if Mr. Cunningham was teaching Roman Numerals I could incorporate that in my classroom...

MR. CUNNINGHAM: ...Or budgets...

MRS. CARTRIGHT: ...Yeah, but we didn't. That's the problem. We got it, and in my experience because I was so busy. I would put that in a file and I never looked at it again. So in terms of academy teachers teaching and reinforcing things, didn't happen. [Atfg,a-p4]

Others expressed the desire to have more purity during each nine-week block in order to truly gain the most benefit out of cross-curricular lessons and activities. Teachers did express excitement about moving to a more traditional schedule next year. They believed a more traditional schedule would increase the purity of teams throughout the year and open the opportunity to do more cross-curriculum activities.

When asked about their impressions of how the freshman academy might have affected the way students learn, teachers thought the freshman academy did not place much emphasis on how students learn. The freshman lead teacher openly admitted School A's freshman academy needed to be more academically focused and have greater continuity within the program.

On an academic level we were very lacking. I think what one of my focuses for next year is to now incorporate not just the fun. I still want to have the fun stuff we did. That really motivated kids. But I also want to bring in outside sources to challenge their thinking and to have what we were talking about earlier. In our freshman classes we keep a notebook, we keep it organized. We are reinforcing it in every class across the board the same basic skills. Because how difficult it must be, we forget how difficult it must be for a thirteen, fourteen, fifteen year old to come in and have to remember the rules and regulations in one class and how to do the notebook there but then have to go 45 minutes later to another class and they've got new rules and regulations and a new notebook and how to head a

paper. So really continuity across the academic level is what I want to strive for next year and I think that would make the transition much easier....[Mrs. Cartright, Afli-p1]

Celebrating Successes

Faculty and staff reported experiencing great success with their freshman academy program. They expressed that not only did the freshmen have the highest class grade point average, they had fewer discipline problems than any other grade and fantastic attendance rates. As a result, throughout the 2006-2007 school year, faculty and staff mentioned constantly praising and rewarding students for their efforts.

Every nine weeks, School A planned a special activity for each ninth grader who maintained a positive attitude, displayed good behavior, showed school pride, had good attendance, and/or worked to maintain or improve his/her grades. Supposedly, these activities not only highlighted those students who showed exemplary academic and behavioral qualities, but also helped to continue to promote a sense of community. Reward activities included bringing a local celebrity DJ out to talk to the students, pizza parties, assemblies, and a field day. During the student focus group interview, ninth-grade students mentioned that they knew teachers and administrators at School A would plan something fun for them if they worked hard. Students reportedly were eager to attend such reward activities.

...[I]t's a chain effect so I'd tell kids in my homeroom, "Look, if you've done this, this, and this, this is what we're planning to do for you." "Really?" Then it's like wildfire and so now all the kids are coming, "Mrs. Cartright, am I eligible? Do you see my name on that list? Can I get to go?" and that's really what happened since the first nine weeks all the way to the end. You let the kids know that, "Hey, if you're going to be a good kid and you're going to participate and you're going to have school spirit, and even if you didn't start out so hot but you improved, we're recognizing that and so we want to reward you for that." That's really how we've kept it going so far. [Mrs. Cartright, Alfg-p5]

At the end of 2006-2007 school year, because of their exemplary GPAs, excellent behavior, and good attendance, over half of the ninth-grade class was eligible to attend the end of the year field day. Additionally, 625 students were eligible to attend an end of the school year

banquet to honor those students with no suspensions and less than five absences. Out of 625 students, 225 were freshmen.

School A's administrators and teachers hoped that what they characterized as the great successes achieved during ninth grade would continue as students moved into their career academies. As Mr. Ramell, the assistant principal for curriculum stated, "[T]his year we finally hit our stride with that [freshman academy]" [Alfg-p7].

Academic Support Programs

In 2004, School A implemented the variable learning time (VLT) concept for Algebra I, due to low Algebra one passing rates.³ This program was specifically designed to help students successfully complete Algebra I during ninth grade. All ninth graders were enrolled in Algebra I during the first quarter of their freshman year and assessed at the midpoint of the quarter. If they did not perform well on the midpoint assessment, students were moved from Algebra I and enrolled in a remedial mathematics class to help prepare them to take Algebra I the next quarter. As a result, students could complete Algebra I in the standard two quarters or over an extended period of three to four quarters. This support structure seemed to help School A's freshman successfully complete Algebra I. During the 2005-2006 school year, 64% of all ninth-grade students passed Algebra I, up from 57.76% during the 2003-2004 school year [Program objectives, Archival].

Culture of Commitment to Ninth-Grade Success

School A was a 50-year-old school rich in tradition and culture. When faculty and staff at School A committed to reorganizing their entire school into small learning communities, they spoke of having to re-create a new school culture. Creating a new culture committed to ninth-

³ 2003-2004 school year 57.76% of ninth graders passed Algebra one.

grade success involves the dedication of all school personnel, especially freshman academy faculty and staff, to establishing a safe, student-focused high school experience for all ninth-grade students (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007; SREB, 2002). At School A, re-establishing a culture of commitment included complete buy-in and support from school leaders, teachers, and students; selecting the right teachers for the freshman academy, providing opportunities for staff development; and dealing with the grant.

Complete Buy-in and Support

Educators at School A understood the importance of buy-in and support for the success of the program. Establishing a school culture committed to ninth-grade success involved full commitment and support from faculty, staff members, and students. Administrators, teachers, and students appeared to play an integral role in establishing School A's freshman academy.

Administration

School A's administration seemed to be very supportive of the freshman academy. By investing time into hand scheduling students' schedules, offering financial assistance for incentive programs and spirit-based activities, and providing teachers with materials and professional development opportunities, School A's administration seemed to truly support their freshman academy. In an interview with the freshman lead teacher, Mrs. Cartright, she shared a recent conversation between Mrs. Mauch and herself that seemed to exemplify how much School A's administration believed in and backed their freshman academy.

...[Y]esterday the principal came to find me to tell me, "Hey, such and such wants to give us a grant. I thought of Keystone. Go ahead and write all this stuff down." She thought of Keystone before she thought of the other learning communities. That says a lot. And that she came to find me, instead of me having to go and beg, and borrow, and plead. [Mrs. Cartright, Afli-p3]

Teachers

During focus group and individual interviews, eliciting teacher buy-in was one of the most talked about challenges associated with establishing an effective freshman academy. School leaders and teachers alike spoke of the difficulty of getting an already established staff to try something new and different. During an administrative interview, Mrs. Mauch mentioned that when School A decided to implement small learning communities, including a freshman academy, only a handful of teachers volunteered to be a part of the school reform effort.

It was a really big deal because high schools weren't doing it. So my faculty was like, "No, not going to do that," except for a handful were like, "Okay, we'll give it a shot. If it will help the kids or make our jobs easier." Then that's how the buy-in came. It was purely voluntary in the beginning. [Mrs. Mauch, Aai-p5]

For the first few years, teachers were selected to be a part of the academy mostly by volunteering. By taking small steps and helping teachers acclimate themselves to the idea of small learning communities and a freshman academy, school leaders believed they began to win over their more seasoned faculty members. Furthermore, administrators and teachers believed more teachers would want to participate in the programs if they sold the idea that freshmen were as good as everyone else at School A and produced positive results, "We sold the product and the product was that freshmen are as good as every single class here at School A if not better" [Mrs. Cartright, Alfg-p3]. Mrs. Cartright thought that through hard work and producing solid academic, social and behavioral results, many teachers would see the benefits and want to become a part of School A's freshman academy. Even teachers who were previously part of the Keystone course during its earliest years reportedly were seeing the great benefits and eager to become a Keystone teacher once again.

Now we have teachers who won't be teaching it next year who are e-mailing me, "Put me back on. I want to be a part of this. What are you doing next year? How can I help?" That's selling a product and our freshmen. [Mrs. Cartright, Alfg-p4]

Not all teachers and academic departments at School A bought into the freshman academy concept. Reportedly, an entire academic department did not wholeheartedly buy-into the freshman academy concept. Many educators at School A believed teachers didn't buy-into the idea because they did not understand the purpose and need for both the freshman academy and Keystone.

I had to confront a teacher because he told his students in his science class that “Keystone is a waste of your time. You don't need to learn how to be organized and you don't need to have all of these fun activities. You haven't earned them.”...I can tell you on that day we were having a pep rally and many students who I had in homeroom or had in Keystone or then the ones I didn't even have, came to me and said this to me, “Mrs. Cartwright!” And were crying. Crying because it was something that was dear to them and this man was breaking it down. What I realized is a lot of teachers, if they don't understand it, they tear it down. [Mrs. Cartright, Afli-p2]

Mrs. Mauch mentioned the importance of educating teachers about the freshman academy.

According to Mrs. Mauch, it was important for teachers to understand the academy would not make more work for teachers; rather, it would ask them to do their work differently, “You're not asking them to do more. Just asking them to do it different” [Mrs. Mauch, Aai-p9].

Administration and teachers seemed able to elicit teacher buy-in from many of their resistant faculty members through educating them on the critical components of the academy.

Teachers, school leaders believed, needed to see how teaming could benefit the teaching and learning process. In an effort to help teachers see the benefits of teams, at the beginning of every school year, each team met with the small learning coordinator to compare the purity of their rosters. School A's small learning coordinator expressed the importance for teachers to realize how pure their teams were, “Whenever the teachers, it's true any of the teams, whenever they see that they have the same students, they fly with it. They're excited” [Mr. Bandery, Slcci,2-p8]. Once teachers understood they truly shared similar students, they reportedly began

to see the benefits teaming could bring to the teaching and learning process and were more willing to give it a try.

For the 2007-2008 school year, every teacher at School A will be a part of either the freshman academy or one of the career academies. School A's administrators sought to get all teachers involved, "...I'm just going after them and then I'm going to convince them that this is the right way to go and if it's not, there are plenty of traditional options out there for them" [Mrs. Ramell, Alfg-p2].

Students

Administrators and teachers at School A believed it was important for students to develop a sense of belonging and ownership.

We would not have a school if it weren't for the kids. So, I truly believe we have to make the kids understand that this is their school. I work here, but this is their school. I think Keystone and our smaller learning communities have really helped us do that. [Mrs. Mauch, Aai-p4].

Mrs. Mauch believed that ninth graders must buy-into the freshman academy concept in order to truly reap the full benefits of such a program. Even upperclassman support was judged essential in order to establish an effective freshman academy. School staff mentioned having conversations with upperclassmen about how School A was treating their ninth graders.

...[W]e were hearing constantly from seniors and sophomores and juniors, "Why didn't you do this for us?" and the answer to our seniors is, "Wouldn't you have liked this when you were a freshman? So help us." So we have got some senior support that way as well in working with the freshmen. [Mr. Bandery, Aslcci,1-p2-3]

Upperclassmen questioned why such a program was not offered for them, indicating the growing popularity in the program over the past four years. School A opened the door for upperclassmen to get involved with the freshman academy. As a result, support programs such as the senior-freshman mentoring program and Peer Counseling II emerged.

Selecting the Right Personnel

Carefully selecting ninth-grade team teachers, especially the Keystone and freshman lead teacher, and having a detail-oriented administrator to work on the master schedule seemed to be very important to the vitality of School A's freshman academy. Administrators at School A spoke quite often of the importance of selecting the right personnel for their freshman academy. They believed that many high school teachers were resistant to teach ninth graders because of their unique developmental needs that were more in line with middle school students than high school students. Mr. Ramell, one of School A's assistant principals believed that ninth-grade teachers needed to have certain qualities, "I think that it takes a talented, dedicated, passionate person to teach that age group, somebody that is very gifted in that regard or willing to learn..." [Mr. Ramell, Alfg-p3].

Mr. Ramell spoke of the importance of making sure teachers who wanted to teach ninth grade bought into the freshman academy concept and were willing to work as a team. Additionally, teachers mentioned it was important to make sure teacher teams worked well together and shared a similar mindset. Students mentioned that both the teacher's attitude and ways of managing/controlling the class were important to them as they wanted teachers with a positive, caring attitude with solid control over the class.

School A's administration initially staffed their freshman academy by soliciting teacher volunteers. Teachers who wanted to be a part of the academy were placed on freshman transition teams. From those volunteers, leaders reported that they carefully selected who taught the freshman transition class, Keystone. Keystone teachers were noted as being a very special type of teacher. Four years ago when the school district was preparing to implement freshman academies in select high schools, both school district personnel and a team of teachers and administrators from each school site met to discuss how best to implement this concept.

According to Mr. Bandery, the small learning community coordinator at School A, careful selection of Keystone teachers was the very first issue discussed.

This class will not be successful if you just went and put anyone in there. It had to be someone who cared for ninth graders and was excited, excited, excited about the class. Excited about them being in ninth grade and was able to get them excited about being in ninth grade. We have a lot of good teachers but not every teacher necessarily fits that bill. [Mr. Bandery, Aslcci,2-p2]

Other important qualities of a Keystone teacher expressed by School A's faculty include being outgoing, understanding the developmental needs of freshman students, and being able to think outside the box. Administrators reportedly tried to select the right teachers to teach Keystone but sometimes scheduling posed an issue forcing them to schedule a teacher to teach a section of Keystone that otherwise would not be selected to teach such a course. At the end of the 2006-2007 school year, Keystone teachers were polled to gain feedback on how School A could improve their Keystone program. A majority of the responses centered on changing some of the teachers who were teaching Keystone.

Careful selection of the freshman lead teacher was also identified as an important component. The responsibilities of the lead teacher was to assist the small learning community coordinator, recruit teachers to the academy, carry out the vision of the academy, help arrange professional development opportunities, work on integrating curriculum, and support team teachers [School district's small learning community lead teacher job description, Archival]. Mr. Bandery, School A's small learning community coordinator, believed the freshman lead teacher needed to be someone who could get on the students' level and work with them to promote unity among the class. Teachers, administrators, and students alike agreed that Mrs. Cartright was an outstanding freshman lead teacher who dramatically improved the freshman academy program, especially Keystone.

Additionally, Mrs. Mauch, principal of School A, spoke of the need to have the right people in charge of the program. She believed that a dedicated administration with the understanding of how to make such a detailed program as the freshman academy work was an essential ingredient to School A's freshman academy.

If I did not have an APC who was so detail oriented, I would not have done it. I've got to be honest with you. I would have just thrown up my hands and said, "We have spent thousands of dollars on this scheduling machine to make this work and you're still telling me I've got to spend hours..." And I don't mind doing hand scheduling. I've always done that, but it is not easy, and he put the time into it to make it work. [Mrs. Mauch, Aai-p8-9]

It seemed that thoughtful selection of freshman academy teachers, Keystone teachers, the lead teacher, and administrative support was important to the success of School A's freshman academy.

Professional Development

Although opportunities for professional development were offered, school leadership and teachers unanimously agreed that more professional development was needed in order to truly gain the most benefit from the freshman academy concept. There were many staff development opportunities funded by the small learning community grant but the common sentiment was more training was necessary. Teachers reported attending professional development sessions that focused on writing integrated curriculum, teaming, and learning about the small learning community concept. Additionally, each year select Keystone teachers from School A attended a Keystone meeting with the other schools that were participating in the small learning community grant during their district-wide professional development day. Other opportunities for professional development included after school trainings for all Keystone and freshman academy teachers and summer Keystone trainings [Team leader annual report form, Archival].

Throughout her time at School A, I had opportunities to speak with many freshman academy teachers. Every freshman academy teacher who taught Keystone spoke of the need for

more training on how to best teach the course. Some believed they were simply handed the curriculum and told to go teach a freshman transition class. Overall, teachers expressed the desire to have more professional development opportunities.

Small Learning Community Grant

Over the past four years, School A's freshman academy had expenses that both School A's administrators and the small learning community grant absorbed. With the expiration of the grant, Mrs. Cartright, School A's freshman lead teacher, spoke of her concerns for generating funds for next year's program.

Next year alone for the first two months we need \$5,000 dollars to stay afloat. Five thousand dollars for two guest speakers to motivate and inspire children to be in high school...Five thousand dollars for the first two months alone so every freshman can come in and have a care package waiting for them in homeroom, complete with a t-shirt, a pencil, an eraser, a calculator, and a planner so that when they walk in, it's Christmas Day. Welcome to School A. This is your year. Five thousand dollars for the first two months alone. That means that in total I'm going to need \$10,000 to 12,000 for the whole entire year to run the program the way I want to run it. [Mrs. Cartright, Afli-p5]

Unfortunately, School A was unable to find a business partner to help fund their small learning communities, a goal they were supposed to meet prior to the conclusion of the grant. Now, School A is trying to figure out how to fund their program for next year. Nevertheless, Mrs. Cartright is determined to improve and expand School A's freshman academy, "...if you're not growing, you're dying. And so I refuse to just rest on the laurels of everything we did this year..." [Mrs. Cartright, Afli-p5].

Summary

Faculty and staff at School A stated their belief that it was important to help freshmen develop a deep connection and sense of belonging to their new school. Through various events involving both students and parents, educators at School A attempted to help students successfully make the transition and see themselves as part of their new high school community.

Students expressed the opinion that the transition activities would have been more beneficial if there were increased upperclassman involvement. Once the school year started, school personnel spoke of implementing a number of programs and activities strategically designed to help students acclimate to high school life and develop the skills necessary to be successful in high school.

Teachers reported that teaming, along with common planning, was very beneficial. Teaming and common planning appeared to create opportunities for increased teacher communication, collaboration, and opportunities to help individual students. Although students reportedly did not understand they were part of a team, it appeared that their Keystone class offered a safe, comfortable, freshman-only environment where students learned the skills necessary to be successful at School A. Keystone teachers seemed to play a vital role in supporting freshman students.

Teachers reported that they did not believe daily instruction was much different as a result of the freshman academy. They stated that they believed the freshman academy needed more of an academic focus. Although teachers perceived no differences in their teaching practices, students did show an increase in grades, attendance, and positive behavior. Celebrating student academic and behavioral success was noted as being very important to faculty, staff, and students.

Faculty and staff agreed that complete buy-in and support, selecting the best teachers to teach freshmen, and extensive professional development was necessary, in order for their freshman academy to be successful. Additionally, due to the expiration of the grant, establishing additional avenues to fund their freshman academy was thought to be an obstacle. In the next chapter, I will highlight School B, another school in the same school district. Along with School

A, School B implemented a freshman academy to help their struggling school become more successful with their ninth-grade students.

CHAPTER 5 SCHOOL B

I really think it [teaming] helps foster the relationship because sometimes I can say to, Mrs. Smith, a teacher here and say, "I am having problems with so and so. How is he doing?" And I find that the student had a wonderful idea or a wonderful grade in Mrs. Smith's and I might want to build off that or mention that to the student, "Hey I heard about that, or you did well in that class." So it is like a family atmosphere type of thing where we keep all the positive and negative things amongst ourselves and try to work out our own problems.

—Mr. Benard, Bfli-p4

Organization and Subculture

School B was a large, 40-year-old urban, comprehensive high school with a total school enrollment of approximately 1700, of which 450 were freshmen. As of the 2006-2007 school year, 64% of the student population was Hispanic, 19.1% was White, 11.2% was Black, 3% was multi-racial, 2.1% was Asian/Pacific Islander, and .6% was Indian.¹ Fifty-nine percent of the student population qualified for free and reduced lunch. At the time the grant was written, School B had a student population of 2127 broken down into 50% Hispanic, 29% White, 15% Black, and 3% Asian. Fifty-three percent qualified for free and reduced lunch. School B had the largest ESOL population in the school district. Close to 60% of the student population had been in an ESOL program at some point in their school careers. Twenty-two percent of the total school population was currently enrolled in School B's ESOL program.²

During the 2002-2003 school year, administrators and teachers at School B decided to apply for a federal small learning community grant along with three other schools in their district. Similar to the other schools in this study, School B did not make Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years and had a student population over 1000 students. School B's

¹ Data gathered from School Ethnic Enrollment Report on 5-9-07.

² Data gathered from Personal Communication with Principal on 4-24-07.

leadership team and faculty expressed the belief that the small learning communities grant would help their students who were not doing well academically.³ At the time of the grant, School B had an average graduation rate of approximately 70%; additionally, 28% of all ninth graders were retained [School district objectives, Archival]. School B's administration understood that improving reading skills would be critical, and thought a more personalized community environment would help its struggling students, especially those with difficulty reading. After receiving the grant, School B began to organize and create the following academies: Health and Judicial Services, Human Services and Hospitality, Business Engineering, Humanities and Multicultural Studies, and Ninth-grade Transition Teams. The mission of School B's small learning community was to "make a difference in the lives of students at School B by giving them individualized support through their high school career" [SLC mission statement, Archival].

School B had many changes in leadership throughout the duration of the grant. They received a new assistant principal of curriculum in July 2004. In 2006, the assistant principal for curriculum was promoted to principal. School B had a mix of veteran faculty members who had been at School B for most of their teaching careers and younger faculty membership who had been teaching less than five years.

During the 2006-2007 school year, freshmen at School B were first enrolled in one of the four freshman transition teams. These four teams made up the freshman academy. As sophomores, they moved to one of the four career academies and remained in that academy throughout the rest of their high school careers. Each freshman transition team consisted of at least one science, English, mathematics, and social studies/Keystone teacher. Students enrolled

³ The student population was 1800 students at the time the grant was written.

in seven 50-minute core and elective classes per year. The first half of their ninth-grade year, students were enrolled in the freshman transition class, Keystone, followed by American Government during the second half of the year. All American Government teachers also taught the Keystone class. Both administration and the small learning community coordinators mentioned that using American Government teachers as Keystone teachers limited who they could select for this special class. School B operated on a traditional seven period day.

Each day, teachers on teams were given a common planning period. Teacher teams reported meeting once week at first and, as the year progressed, they adjusted their meeting time to a bi-weekly schedule. During team meetings, teachers reported exchanging ideas, coordinating learning strategies and information, identifying nonperforming students, and eliciting advice from fellow teammates. On three different occasions, Mr. Brommel, principal of School B, articulated how important Keystone and common planning were to the vitality of School B's freshman academy.

I think the key element to the small learning community is that keystone class or that freshman orientation class. That's key and the second key is to make sure that the team of teachers have a common planning period. If you don't have those two things it isn't going to happen. It's not going to work. [Mr. Brommel, Bai-p1]

During the 2004-2005 school year, School B implemented proximity. Proximity is where team classrooms are physically located close to each other. Because their science labs could not be moved, School B rearranged teacher/team classrooms in an effort to place the mathematics, English, and Keystone/government teachers as close to their teammate's science class as possible. Additionally, students were assigned lockers right outside their classrooms. Such proximity reportedly contributed many benefits such as reducing tardiness, allowing teachers to have daily interactions with one another, helping teachers monitor their students, and increasing the sense of being part of a team.

Administration reported the challenges with scheduling the above-listed freshman academy structures, “I will tell you the looping, the whole team thing is a scheduling nightmare [emphasis], NIGHTMARE [major emphasis]” [Mr. Brommel, Blfg-p4]. Mr. Brommel elaborated on the complexity of scheduling pure teams. Purity refers to the degree team teachers share similar students. School leadership and teachers alike alluded to the importance of having a common group of teachers working with a select group of similar students. Specialty classes, numerous levels of course offerings, and team teachers needing a common planning period were all viewed as issues that prohibited complete purity of teacher-student teams.

The things that will affect it are the single classes like we only have two orchestra classes. We don't have it all day long. And those classes are going to affect some things. The key to it is what Mr. Hanes is saying, I think, is twofold. First of all, you get them into as many like core classes within the team....The second thing is you have to make sure that all those teachers are off the same period and that's where the scheduling nightmare comes in. [Mr. Brommel, Blfg-p7]

Even with the above-mentioned scheduling obstacles, administrators were able to get teams to be about 60% pure. Many teachers mentioned that the 2006-2007 teams were not as pure as in past years. Teachers expressed the lack of purity hindered them from organizing specific, team-related activities. Furthermore, teachers also mentioned that they were uncertain if students knew they were part of a team.

MR. DAUDRY: I definitely never felt like the kids thought they were on a team.

MR. PRICE: I agree. I never felt it either. [Btfg,b-p4]

During the student focus group interview, students were asked to describe their freshman academy and team. Based on their responses, students did not appear to understand that they were part of a team within School B's freshman academy. When asked if they shared classes with similar students, they did mention noticing some similarities.

R: If I was to ask you to describe something called a freshman academy, would you know what that is and could you describe it?

MIKA: No.

R: How about your team?

MIKA: Team as in what?

R: Do you notice that you are in classes with similar people...

MIKA: ...ya...

R: ...and have similar teachers?

MIKA: Ya, for my first period it's always the same group of people...

BRUCE: ...It's like a group of fish going to the same place.

MIKA: It's like the same people. It's all of us right here. But some people hang out with different people each day. But my first period, it's all the same people. But my second period...

R: But actually in your classes, do you see the same people throughout the day?

BRUCE Ya.

MIKA: Ya, some people

CAITLYN: Like two or three. Most of my 7th period is in my 5th class right now.

R: So there is some similarity between your 7th period and your 5th period?

MIKA: I always count in my head how many people are in my next class. [Bsf-g-p7-8]

The following paragraphs will elaborate on School B's freshman academy and how it might help students successfully make the transition to high school. The extent School B created opportunities to develop a sense of belonging, a supportive and collaborative learning environment, freshman-focused teaching and learning, and a culture of commitment to ninth-grade success will be discussed. Each domain highlights the voices of School B's administrators, teachers, and students.

Sense of Belonging to School Community

The importance of establishing deep connections at the high school before the first day of school, and offering opportunities to remain connected, is extremely important in helping students make the transition to high school (Cushman, 2006; Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999, Mac Iver, 1990; Mizelle, 2005; Osterman, 2000; Queen, 2002). Understanding adolescents' need to develop a sense of belonging and connection to School B, teachers and administrators reported creating opportunities for students to develop connections early on. Additionally, they continued to help students establish a sense of belonging by offering various programs and events that supported and encouraged students to continue to make connections to School B throughout the school year.

Establishing Connections Early

Teachers and administrators reported implementing many different transitional activities designed to help students become part of School B. Faculty and staff believed activities that opened the channel of communication between teachers at both the middle and high school levels, connected students to their new school and classmates early, and involved both students and parents were valuable. Through working with feeder middle schools, summer camp, and open houses, administrators and teachers at School B attempted to help students establish early connections to their new school.

Feeder Middle Schools

School B had two main feeder middle schools that provided most of their incoming freshman student population. School B's administrators and small learning coordinators spoke of the importance of developing connections with their feeder middle schools but expressed the challenges associated with developing deep connections with one of their schools.

We never were really were able to develop that connection with School W. I don't know why. I really tried, but again, it may be half your population in your feeder school but you just got to work with what you have. So I worked with the other middle school. [Ms. Nottings, Bslcci,1-p6]

Despite the absence of a working relationship with one feeder middle school, they were able to reach out to incoming students at that site. School leadership spoke of sending student groups, coaches, and school leaders to both the major feeder middle schools and other schools with fewer incoming students to discuss high school life, opportunities for involvement, and academics. For example, School B's small learning coordinators both mentioned sending a group of high school students to talk with eighth-grade students at both major feeder middle schools. Small eighth-grade student groups met with students from School B to talk about high school. Additionally, School B's small learning coordinator and freshman lead teacher spoke of busing in students from both middle schools for a tour of the campus and participate in an incentive-based program.

Summer Camp

For the past few years, School B hosted a multi-day summer camp for all incoming freshmen and their parents. Faculty and staff mentioned that summer camp was a time for students and parents to familiarize themselves to the school facility, meet ninth-grade teachers and school leaders, participate in team building activities, discuss the freshman academy concept, get their schedules, and issue lockers. Students also had the opportunity to attend sessions on different topics, including school traditions, good study habits, time management, School B's academies, and academic and vocational programs. Reportedly, opportunities for teambuilding activities were also offered. According to Mr. Hanes, one of School B's small learning community coordinators, many parents expressed interest in learning about School B, attending all three days of the camp with their children, "We've had parents that have sat here for

three days with their kids. It actually shocked me to death that they took that kind of time and stayed with them all day long” [Mr. Hanes, Blfg-p8].

Open Houses

School leaders reported hosting numerous open houses throughout students’ eighth-grade year. Both parents and students were invited to attend the open houses. School leaders expressed that open houses were informational sessions designed to help parents and students make the best decisions possible regarding scheduling, career programs, extracurricular involvement, and graduation requirements.

Staying Connected

Reportedly, it was the intent of School B’s faculty and staff to use their freshman academy structures and programs to provide extra support to help students continue to build connections once they entered high school. Faculty and staff sought to foster student connections by focusing on the first weeks of school and connecting students as a group. The freshman academy transition course and teaming were the two major structures School B utilized to focus on the first weeks and connect students.

Intense Focus on the First Weeks of School

During the first weeks of school, administrators and educators at School B spoke of spending a great deal of time helping students learn new policies, procedures, and daily routines that students needed to learn. During the student focus group interview, students spoke of having to learn new rules, meet new people, avoid being bullied, and find their way around school. Based on student comments, it appeared that during the first weeks of school students perceived themselves as being the youngest students in a new, large school. Caitlyn stated, “We were at the top of the totem pole but now we sunk down. We are like little fishies in a pond” [Caitlyn, Bsfg-p3]. Students spoke to the importance of faculty, staff, and upperclassmen support in helping

them adjust to and become a member of School B. Keystone, School B's transition course, placed an intense focus on helping students adjust to high school.

Keystone's purpose was to provide a safe freshman-focused atmosphere where ninth-grade issues and concerns were addressed [Keystone curriculum resource guide, Archival]. Mr. Hanes explained that during the first few weeks of Keystone, students found out about School B's history, learned the layout of the school, met faculty and staff, and learned where to go for assistance. He further mentioned that Keystone instructors physically walked their students down to the guidance and student affairs offices to meet and get acquainted with the staff. Additionally, upperclassmen reportedly visited all Keystone classes to talk with students about school life. All students that participated in the focus group expressed they had to adjust to high school on their own but mentioned that certain Keystone teachers were supportive and helped them adjust to School B.

CAITLYN: They didn't. The teachers did [help students adjust to high school] but the administrators didn't.

BRUCE: You had to adjust yourself.

MIKA: Ms. Kantry was so cool...

BRUCE ...Ya she was cool...

MIKA: ...She would talk to us about it. She told us it was going to be hard but we had to...

BRUCE ...that was Keystone.

MIKA: It helped us a lot. [Bsf-g-p6]

The second major part of Keystone focused on learning the tools necessary to be successful at School B and how to handle the freedom associated with high school life [Keystone curriculum resource guide, Archival]. As Mr. Brommel, School B's principal expressed the importance of helping students adjust to high school life.

Nobody's walking them in a single file line to lunch, classes, and things like that. They're moving all over this building and there's a lot of freedom, and with that comes responsibility. So that class has been huge and that's one of the main reasons we're going to carry it on. [Mr. Brommel, Bai-p2]

Uniting Freshmen

Teaming reportedly helped to unite School B's freshmen as a group. Many teachers expressed how important they thought it was for incoming ninth graders to become part of a group. As expressed by Mr. Benard, School B's freshman lead teacher, "I think for the freshmen, it really helps to identify them as a freshman family" [Mr. Benard, Bfli-p1]. By bringing students together and forming a group-like atmosphere, School B's faculty noticed that students seemed to have an easier time adjusting to high school and exhibited an increase in school spirit.

I personally think it is helping a lot because you are building team spirit when a kid from School W and a kid from Schools P [the two feeder middle schools for school B], who have never met, all of a sudden are in four classes together. The chances of them becoming a School B student rather than a School W spider or a School P archer happens much faster. They're in the same classes so it breaks down some of the initial barriers and it gives them a feeling of a home base. [Mr. Hanes, Blfg-p6]

Similar to many schools in Florida, School B had a large population of students that transferred in from out state, even out of the country. Mr. Brommel believed that because of the freshman academy, these new students had an easier time adjusting to School B.

[W]e have many new students that come from out of country, out of state, and move right in. And it's easier for the ninth graders because they now have a buddy in four of their classes. It is easier to build that friendship, that bond. It is easier for them to start fitting in. [Mr. Brommel, Blfg-p6]

Although many teachers believed that teaming had the potential to connect students together as a group, they report that it fell short of achieving the strong sense of unity. Teachers believed that the students did not know they were on a team. To increase the sense of belonging to a group, they thought additional team activities were necessary.

I think it's good for ninth graders to be part of a group. I think it needed to be a little more seen as a group. They don't know they are on a team. These kids don't know they are on

team A or team B. We're team D. Our kids don't know they are on team D. I have a friend that works in another school. They have their team for small learning and each of their teams have a name and they have a mascot and they meet once a month and do fun activities. They know [emphasis] they are part of a group. [Mrs. Smith, Btfg,c-p4]

Supportive and Collaborative Learning Environment

A supportive and collaborative learning environment is an important element in helping teachers create a student-focused atmosphere that assists in the high school transition process (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007). Over the past four years, the implementation of School B's freshman academies is reported to have allowed teachers opportunities to establish a professional support network where they could collaborate with each other. Additionally, teaming and common planning was believed to create opportunities for teachers to talk about common students.

Teacher Support Network

Numerous teachers at School B mentioned that both teaming and sharing common students helped to create a community of support. Teachers reported being more comfortable and confident as a result of having a group of teachers with which to collaborate and get assistance.

Its nice to talk to other teachers. Even just to vent sometimes about a kid or a situation. It does create a community. And we've had it happen before. I'll tell Mr. Cruz about an issue I'm having with a kid and he will talk to them in his class and the kid will be like "how did you know that. How did you know that. How did you know that Mrs." Its nice to know that you have a team of teachers behind you. [Mrs. Smith, Btfg,C-p1]

Some teachers expressed the opinion that the freshman academy and ninth-grade teams encouraged teachers to develop relationships with one another resulting in a family-like atmosphere.

I really think it helps foster the relationship because sometimes I can say to, Mrs. Smith, a teacher here, "I am having problems with so and so. How is he doing?" and I find that the student had a wonderful idea or a or a wonderful grade in Mrs. Smith's and I might want to build off that or mention that to the student, "Hey I heard about that, or you did well in that class." So that it is like a family atmosphere type of thing where we keep all the positive

and negative things amongst ourselves and try to work out our own problems. [Mr. Benard, Bfli-p4]

Teachers communicated with each other about student- and teacher-related concerns trying to work through them together. Because of teaming, teachers reported being part of a family-like professional support network rather than being isolated and alone.

Student-Centered Talk

Bringing core teachers together to talk about students is an uncommon practice in most traditional high schools. In traditional high schools, teachers are typically organized by academic departments. Prior to establishing small learning communities, including the freshman academy, School B was organized by departments. Because teachers were organized by departments and not by interdisciplinary teams, it seemed very easy for students to go unnoticed.

A ninth grader falls through the cracks because they can float through an entire year and almost go unnoticed. I know that sounds kind of crazy but it's very possible for kids to skip an entire month of fifth period and that teacher will never have discussed anything with those other teachers. [Ms. Nottings, Bslcci,1-p9]

Because of School B's freshman academy and ninth-grade interdisciplinary teaming, faculty and staff expressed that it was easier to spot students who would otherwise go unnoticed. Teachers mentioned that teaming prompted an increase in teacher collaboration. Teachers expressed having the opportunity to give individualized student attention, see the whole child, collaborate with each other in their teaching practices, create a family-like atmosphere, show students they care about them, and offer collaborative interventions. When School B's core academic teachers came together to talk about their students, they reported not seeing each student as "my third period science student" but as a whole-child with unique academic, social, and emotional needs. Through such conversations, teachers also discovered how their own teaching practices helped or possibly hindered learning.

You have one teacher with 150 kids that they've sort of got to keep track of and think about but instead of just worrying about your third period class, you start to see the kid as a whole maybe because you know that they failed their science test and that they got a D on their Algebra I test. If you already know that that kid is sort of like at risk that's how the discussion starts. That's when teachers start talking. That's when things can come out where you may have a kid and one teacher says, "Oh, but they're totally fine in my class." Then you're looking at teacher styles and then you're looking at classroom management of that teacher. I mean, it goes both ways. [Ms. Nottings, Bslcci,1-p10]

Proximity and teaming appeared to help encourage student-centered talk. Because teachers on the same team were in close proximity to each other, they reported being able to track of students, hold informal conversations about students, and implement immediate interventions when necessary.

There are teachers that had rooms side by side that said good morning to each other and that was the extent of it. Now when they walk out in the hall and they are standing side by side. It's like "Johnny just failed my science test." And, "What are you doing with him right now in Keystone?" And "Well there is nothing that he can't miss so take him right back in there and have him retake that test right now." There's been a lot more of that that goes on with the concept and it has worked [emphasis]. [Mr. Hanes, Blfg-p6]

Teachers thought that because students and teachers were teamed, students would realize their teachers were collaborating about their needs. Ultimately, they believed students would realize teachers really cared about them.

MS. KANTRY: ...We have one mutual student, Mr. R, who was out for two days, and I'm freaking out because I'm thinking that the kid has been deported. And I mention it to her and she's saying it. This is a kid that all of us have. He's a good kid. A really good kid and we were all like...

MRS. SMITH: ...and he has perfect attendance. And he missed two days. We came over and said she said, "Have you seen L?" "No, let me go ask Mr. Cruz. Have you seen L?" And nobody's seen him And we all know that he is here illegally and we were all oh gosh.

MS. KANTRY: And he was like, "I was sick"

MRS. SMITH: But I'll tell you what, L realized that day how much we all cared about him. [Btfg,c-p2]

However, throughout the student focus group interview, no reference was made that would indicate students understood they had a team of teachers who talked about, cared for, and supported them.

During almost every conversation with School B's faculty and administrators, the ability to meet as a whole, school-wide support team to hold student interventions was identified as a great benefit of the freshman academy concept. At School B, team teachers, small learning community coordinators, school psychological services, and administrators were all available to meet with the student and his/her parent(s) at the same time. These meetings reportedly allowed everyone involved to have the opportunity to work together and offer an intervention plan. It was expressed that often such interventions were held in lieu of traditional disciplinary actions. It was perceived that these meetings helped to keep students in the classroom getting the instruction needed. School personnel reported many intervention success stories, mostly related to a reduced level of behavioral issues. They also reported a reduction in academic, social, or emotional problems as well. Meetings were also held between the student and his/her team of teachers in a more informal manner. Overall, by having a support network in place to handle issues as they may arise, faculty and staff at School B were able to intervene and help students to get back on track in a way that was thought to be non-threatening and supportive.

Freshman-Focused Teaching and Learning

Exemplary freshman academies place a strong focus on teaching and learning, including the use of shared instructional strategies, curriculum integration, an assortment of teaching strategies, and the implementation of curriculum that aids the transition process (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007). Throughout the month of May 2007, I observed two classrooms per team at School B, for a total of eight classroom observations. During these observations were witnessed, including a variety of teaching strategies, including lecture,

worksheet-based seatwork, textbook-based seatwork, whole-class conversations, review games, student presentations, graphic organizers, and individual student recitation of the prologue to a play [classroom observations, 5-2-07, 5-9-07, 5-11-07]. Four teachers, Mrs. Matters, Mrs. Rice, Mr. Price, and Mrs. Smith, appeared to have great rapport, high student expectations, solid classroom management strategies, and student-focused lessons [classroom observations, 5-2-07, 5-9-07, 5-11-07]. When I asked teachers if the freshman academy influenced the way they taught, most teachers, including those listed above, expressed the belief that the freshman academy had little effect on the teaching styles and methods.

R: What about the way the freshman community affected the way you teach and the way the students learn?

MRS. SMITH: I don't think so. I think that if things would have been different it might have affected the way I taught. [Btfg,c-p7]

Similarly, teachers did not perceive that the freshman academy greatly affected how students learned. Some expressed it might have affected teaching and learning had there been more team effort, a greater push to be involved, and more students in common between teachers.

The desire to have more commonality among student-teacher teams was perceived to be important to the teaching and learning process. Despite the difficulties associated with establishing a freshman academy with pure student-teacher teams, teachers were fond of the freshman academy concept and its potential benefits to teaching and learning.

I think it works. When it works, it works wonderful. And when it doesn't work, it is still better than having nothing in place. If you have 50% of your kids, then, you have 50% in common. That is still something you have to look at there. [Mr. Benard, Bfli-p8]

When asked to elaborate on the instructional practices currently implemented that might be of benefit to ninth graders, teachers spoke of their freshman transition course, continuity of teaching practices between team teachers, and academic and behavioral incentive-based programs.

Freshman Transition Course

During the fall semester, every freshman at School B enrolled in a half-credit elective course called Keystone. Similar to the other schools in this study, Keystone was designed to help students acclimate themselves to high school and learn about School B's history and traditions. All ninth graders were required to keep a notebook of record that served as their portfolio of student work completed in Keystone.

In Keystone, students prepared for their classes and studied for upcoming exams. A board with weekly team assignments, course topics, and scheduled exams, was located in every Keystone classroom. Mr. Hanes, School B's small learning community coordinator, believed the board helped Keystone teachers know what each student's workload was and could make sure that he/she was doing whatever necessary to prepare for each class. Reportedly, team teachers would notify the Keystone teacher of an upcoming exam and provide the teacher with the review guide. It was hoped that Keystone teachers would review with their students for upcoming evaluations. Teachers spoke of notifying their fellow Keystone teammate if a student was doing poorly in their class. Keystone teachers would then work with students to develop the necessary knowledge/skills to be successful in their classes. Guidance counselors reportedly visited Keystone classes to talk with students and help them think proactively about their academic careers. Through Keystone, School B attempted to identify at-risk students and connect those students with guidance counselors so they could intervene and offer assistance.

Keystone teachers reported helping students with school-related needs and concerns. They checked planners, made sure class work and homework was complete, reinforced concepts being taught in other classes, and helped students learn additional ways to study. When asked to describe their Keystone course, students reported Keystone helped them learn how to focus and study.

CAITLYN: It taught us how to study. Like if there is a lot of tests over the year, you need to learn how to cope, how to study, and how to buckle down. You can't really have a lot of a life.

MIKA: It was like teaching you how to study. It teaches you if you don't know this, this is what you can do to not just memorize it but actually know it.' In middle school, you could memorize things and you would be ok but, in high school, it is not just about memorizing [emphasis], its about knowing [emphasis] it. You have to know it. Our advanced communications methods teacher Mr. L, he teaches you it. He taught us yesterday 'give a student knowledge and he'll use it for a day, teach a student knowledge and he'll use it for a lifetime'. It's like saying you can't just memorize something, you have to actually learn it and know it and that will help you do life. That is what Keystone is about. Just helping you to study and get you prepared. It was pretty much a preparing class, to prepare you for high school.

R: Do you think it was beneficial for you?

MIKA: Umhmm

BRUCE: Ya

CAITLYN: Very.

MIKA: It helped me study a lot because, honestly, I really didn't know how to study. I just read the book. But now I take notes...

CAITLYN: ...break it down...

MIKA: ...write notes in the margin, highlight, write little messages.

Caitlyn: Things that help you remember. [Bsfg-p11]

Some teachers believed the Keystone curriculum was too "fluffy" and needed to be more rigorous.

MS. FROTH: I mean, my Keystone curriculum was pretty, uh, I don't know what the word, fluffy? I had to come up with a lot of stuff because I didn't agree with a lot of the curriculum. Like they wanted to do trust falls and all this throwing yarn and I didn't think it was appropriate for them. I wanted it to be more military. Like organizing their notebook. I would ask teachers how they organize their notebook and try to do more stuff like that. How to take notes.

MRS. RICE: Academically organized.

MS. FROTH: Academically, not this feel good, you know. They already get enough of that I think. They need to come in here and have rigid, rigor, you know, from day one. [Btfg,a-p4]

Other teachers believed the course was not pertinent to student needs. They thought the course needed to focus more on the specific life skills and serve as an intervention.

I spent the first nine weeks, personally, doing some useless crap. Like, ok, here's the curriculum. But the second nine weeks I was like forget it. I'm not using the curriculum anymore. My kids are not looking at what type of learner they are. They are trying to figure out how to stay alive and not get shot...They need a lot of practical issues. For example, I didn't know we had a social worker at this school until second semester. We all had these kids. We had the CM's, RT's the MO's, that are out two-thirds of the time. There should have been more of an intervention. At least for me I felt like I kind of wasted the first semester. I didn't waste it in getting to know them. I didn't waste it in seeing the camaraderie between us. I wasted it by not giving those kids what they needed. [Mrs. Kantry, Btfg,c-p1-2]

Continuity Between Classes

Because of teaming, continuity between team teachers reportedly increased. Teachers at School B believed teaming helped to develop common teaching practices. It also reportedly allowed them to borrow and implement teaching strategies from team members and build upon each other's curriculum through the use of cross-curricular kinds of activities.

Teaming reportedly helped teachers collaborate about and develop common teaching practices. For example, one teacher spoke of how his team planned to simultaneously teach and reinforce certain academic skills.

Some teams have agreed "This week we are going to do selective underlining and next week everybody on the team is going to do two column notes. Then, we are going to find out 'did it work for you?'" [Mr. Benard, Blfi-p7]

Although teachers spoke of using consistent teaching methods, I did not observe any consistent strategies nor did I notice any consistency in rules and classroom procedures during my classroom observations.

Teachers also talked about borrowing teaching ideas from other team members. Teachers reported that because they met as a team, they began to collaborate and share teaching strategies that worked well in their classrooms. Some spoke of instances when they would implement a

teaching strategy a fellow team member successfully used in his/her classroom and how students were able to recognize the strategy as being something they had previously done in another class.

Teachers at School B also believed it was important to help students understand that academic subjects are not isolated from each other but are connected.

The idea is to show the students that science is not isolated from English which is isolated from math. No, we're all in the same building and there is a common thread running through. Just like there is a common thread of them being part of the School B faculty, here's a common thread of the ideas running from one academic area to another. So sometimes another teacher may have a good idea that I think will work in my class. If it gets them going, if it shows that you can take something from another areas and apply it to science and it makes them learn that much better or makes it more interesting so that they remember that fact then great. Then I know I've accomplished something. [Mr. Benard, Bfli-p2]

Some teachers mentioned working with another teacher on cross-curricular kinds of activities.

For example, one teacher elaborated on a time when she taught Communism at the same time as students were reading *Animal Farm* in English. Ms. Nottings, one of School B's small learning coordinators, believed such cross-curriculum integration was a byproduct of allowing the teaming concept to grow and develop on its own.

Students Helping Students

Teaming appeared to allow opportunities for students to collaborate and work together on assignments. Although they did not use the word teaming, students mentioned having similar students in multiple classes that they would go to for help with schoolwork. They reported being able to help each other with homework, remind each other of upcoming assignments, and catch up on missed work.

Like me and his brother, we were in the Keystone class last semester which was 5th period and we had 6th period together. So, whenever we needed help for 5th period, we would give it to each other in 6th period. [Mika, Bdfg-p8]

Students talked about developing their own support system among their student teams to help each other throughout the school day.

Celebrating Successes

Because many freshmen tend to slip both academically and behaviorally, School B's faculty wanted to do something to motivate them to work hard, earn good grades, and "taste success." As a result, School B implemented "Eagle Mall." "Eagle Mall" was a school-wide incentive based program for freshmen who earned good grades, behavior, and attendance. Students were given a certain amount of eagle bucks based on how good their grades, behavior, and attendance were for the nine-week grading period. With their eagle buck, students were able to purchase products donated from local businesses. Through this incentive-based program, faculty and staff thought they could motivate all freshmen to do well academically, continue to work hard throughout their four years, and graduate high school.

Academic Support Programs

In an attempt to offer academic assistance to students who were not performing well, School B started an after-school credit recovery program. Directly after school for eight weeks, students had the opportunity to work toward earning credits for classes they needed to pass, "We are trying to give them every opportunity so when they are a senior, they are on task and on track" [Mr. Benard, Bfli-p4]. This after-school credit recovery program was offered for all students at School B.

Culture of Commitment to Ninth-grade Success

Educators at School B appeared to understand that committing to an exemplary educational experience for ninth graders involved the support of the entire school. All faculty and staff, especially freshman academy school personnel, must be committed to providing a safe, caring, student-focused high school experience (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007; SREB, 2002). Faculty and staff mentioned that re-establishing a culture of complete commitment to School B's freshmen included the following: complete buy-in and

support from faculty and staff; selecting the right teachers for the freshman academy; providing opportunities for staff development; and dealing with the discontinuation of the funds the grant provided.

Complete Buy-in and Support

Many at School B expressed the need for both administrators and teachers to be committed to the freshman academy concept. In order to have a successful freshman academy, teachers believed it was imperative to have complete administrative support. School B's administrators and small learning coordinators believed they needed to gain the support of each teacher and staff member in order to have a strong freshman academy. Gaining buy-in and support was reportedly one of the challenges that affected the complete implementation of School B's freshman academy.

Administration

School B experienced a change in leadership during the years they were a part of the small learning community grant. The current principal came to School B after its first year of the grant and was promoted to principal during the fourth and final year of the grant. Mr. Brommel, the current principal of School B, openly talked about his initial reservations regarding School B's small learning communities and freshman academy.

I first got here as an APC three years ago. I hadn't done any research. I'd never been any part of it [small learning communities]. I heard it. I read very little on it and in concept it looked like a great idea. Wasn't a big fan of it because it prevented or at least to me I felt like it was preventing me from doing my job which was scheduling kids. And when I got here it [scheduling] was a mess. [Mr. Brommel, Bai-p1]

He proceeded to mention that he grew more confident about the program as he educated himself on the program and saw the positive results communities and the freshman academy were producing,

...[T]he thing that sold me on the small learning communities was when we did FCAT and we realized or at least at that time their attendance rate was incredible. They took it [FCAT] seriously and that's when I said "You know, they have something to this."...I like it now. I'm sold on it for ninth grade. [Mr. Brommel, Bai-p1]

Numerous times throughout both the leadership focus group and administrator interview, Mr. Brommel emphasized his support for the freshman academy program for certain ninth graders. He believed higher ability students, with both good test scores and previous high grades, would benefit more from taking an advanced placement course in lieu of Keystone. As a result, next year, not every ninth grader will be enrolled in School B's Keystone course. Additionally, it is Mr. Brommel's belief that small learning communities were not necessary after ninth grade.

Throughout my conversations with School B's freshman academy teachers and small learning community coordinators, many expressed the need for more administrative support. They thought administration viewed the academy concept as a "big headache" and therefore, it became a sidebar project without adequate administrative attention. Many expressed their frustrations about how the lack of administrative support hindered them from doing more with the academy concept.

I don't know how anyone else feels, but I don't feel that our administration backed the idea enough. Without the administration backing us we couldn't do anything. We were very limited in what we were allowed to do and the time we had to do it. I think that if administration got behind this movement, it could be really good. [Mrs. Smith, Btfg,c-p3]

Others mentioned a lack of communication between administrators and teachers, "I never saw our goals or what we were implementing. It's just you are a part of this community" [Mr. Daudry, Btfg,b-p4]. Teachers believed the lack of communication limited what they were able to do on their teams and within their academy.

Teachers

School administrators and small learning community coordinators believed that, over time, a majority of School B's teachers came to support both the freshman academy and small learning

community concept. Throughout the first year, administrators reported “selling” the freshman academy idea to their faculty. Administrators believed teachers seemed to buy into the concept because School B moved from a D to a C school during their first year of implementing small learning communities. After four years of implementing their freshman academy, administrators did believe that most of School B’s faculty supported the tenets of the freshman academy.

Many teachers eagerly spoke of their fondness and support for the program, “I feel like, when first got going, everyone was really excited about it and last year was really organized and people were really, really trying” [Mrs. Smith, Btfg,c-p1]. Most teachers believed their students needed a more stable and personalized school environment because a majority of their students had little stability in their home life. Teachers shared stories of students expressing the only reason they came to school was to get breakfast and lunch. It appeared that teachers truly wanted to help their students and believed that, through the freshman academy, they could make a difference in students’ lives.

Despite their fondness for the freshman academy concept, some veteran teachers at School B held the belief that the reform effort had a limited lifespan.

I thought it was a good idea and I’m sorry that it was never fully implemented because I don’t think we will ever fully realize the potential, but it’s not the first time I’ve seen that in education. You’re around awhile and there are some good ideas but they’re rarely ever fully implemented and it’s not that it’s easy to do that because it’s the nature of the beast, I guess. [Mrs. Rice, Btfg,a-p6]

Almost every teacher I spoke with expressed some form of concern or frustration toward the expiration of the small learning communities grant. Because they knew the grant was ending, many teachers reportedly became skeptical and began questioning why they were continuing when they knew that next year they would be without the additional support the grant provided, “I think this year, as soon as we heard that we did not get reapproved, I feel like people are like ‘why are we doing this anymore’” [Mrs. Smith, Btfg,c-p1].

Selecting the Right Personnel

School B's leaders reportedly understood the importance of carefully selecting freshman academy teachers, "Teachers make the program or are going to kill the program. They are the key....You need to make sure you have the best person, the best fit" [Mr. Brommel, Blfg-p15]. When selecting teachers, they looked for caring, sincere teachers who would "get down in the dirt and pull them up by their bootstraps" [Mr. Hanes, Blfg-p5]. Through word of mouth, administrators recruited strong yet caring teachers for their freshman academy, "We got some of our best teachers and we twisted arms, begged and pleaded, and told them how great it was going to be" [Mr. Hanes, Blfg-p5]. By selecting the "best of the best" to teach ninth grade, administrators were confident that students would gain the solid academic foundation necessary to be successful in high school.

Professional Development

At the beginning of the grant, administrators at School B reported sending faculty and staff to contiguous school districts with active small learning communities to solicit advice from school faculty and administrators. Both the small learning coordinators and teachers spoke of the numerous consultants that worked with School B's faculty over the past four years. Faculty members also mentioned attending multiple national conferences that specialize in small learning communities, small schools, best practices, and school reform. Teachers and administrators spoke of presenting together at national small learning community conventions. More recently, during fall semester of the 2006-2007 school year, school personnel had the opportunity to attend the following workshops: personalized learning in small learning community, a small learning community regional workshop, and a facilitated leadership workshop [Team leader annual report form, Archival]. During numerous conversations, administrators and teachers alike expressed the need for additional ongoing professional development. Teachers and administrators specifically

mentioned Keystone and cross-curriculum integration as two areas where more training was needed.

Due to the course's unique social-emotional-academic focus, many teachers thought they were ill-prepared to teach the Keystone curriculum. Administrators expressed that teachers did not know how to teach Keystone as their professional training was content-related, "We know how to teach world history. Now we are handing them a book that says Keystone curriculum and it's about that thick" [Mr. Hanes, Blfg-p11]. It is Mr. Hane's belief that teachers needed more training on the importance behind the curriculum and methods for delivering instruction.

Although cross-curriculum training was offered for teachers to collaborate as a team and build cross-curricular lessons, the lack of purity was seen as a limitation to the extent they could draw from, expand upon, and design cross-curricular lessons. Other teachers believed trainings did not provide enough information on exactly how to plan cross-curricular lessons and expressed the need for more planning time.

MRS. SMITH: There are a lot of opportunities for cross curricular things but , we haven't had any training on it this year. Half of the trainings are like 'you guys come together and make up a plan.' Show us how to do that. English and science are totally different. How are you going to...

MR. CRUZ: ...Or give us the time to do it. [Btfg,c-p6]

Overall, teachers expressed they would have implemented more cross-curriculum lessons would if purity was better, were given additional training, and provided additional planning time.

Small Learning Community Grant

Throughout conversations with freshman academy teachers, they expressed concerns regarding the future of School B's freshman academy and small learning communities. Teachers believed the future of their freshman academy was questionable partly due to the ending of grant funding. School B's freshman lead teacher, a 21-year-veteran teacher, talked about numerous

federal programs that he has seen throughout his career die because of lack of funds, “Without funding, the whole program collapses and you are right back to where you started” [Mr. Benard, Bfli-p8]. Teachers expressed it was impractical to expect a program of this caliber to operate without any funding. Simply stated, “They want big changes for little. It’s not practical” [Mr. Cruz, Btfg,c-p7].

Summary

School B’s personnel spoke of helping incoming freshmen develop a sense of belonging by creating opportunities for students to develop connections to their new school. A collaborative effort between School B and their feeder schools resulted in numerous proactive transition activities. Despite the lack of solid connection with one feeder middle school, School B was able to arrange transition activities such as summer camp, open houses, high school visits, and conversations between high school personnel and eighth-grade students at both feeder schools.

Once students entered high school, faculty and staff at School B continued to help students establish a sense of belonging by offering various initiatives that supported and encouraged students to continue to make connections. Such initiatives included a course to help students adjust to high school life and the establishment of student-teacher teams. Although school personnel believed Keystone helped students acclimate themselves to high school life, students expressed that they primarily adjusted to high school on their own with help from a few Keystone teachers. Additionally, although teachers thought teaming would help to unite students together as a group, it reportedly fell short of achieving an enhanced sense of unity and belonging.

Interdisciplinary teaming, especially common planning, along with proximity was reported to help increase student-centered talk and establish a professional teacher support network. Due to teaming, teachers believed students would understand that they are cared for and supported.

When I spoke with freshman academy students, they did not make reference to teacher care or support. Teachers also believed teaming created a professional educator support network or “family.” Reportedly, teaming afforded opportunities for teachers to work together, support each other, and reduce the sense of isolationism.

Although teachers expressed being fond of the freshman academy concept, they thought it had little effect on the way they taught or the way students learned. Some educators believed the academy would have impacted the way they taught if there was increased team effort, more involvement, and greater purity. School personnel thought the freshman transition course, increased teacher continuity, and academic and behavioral incentive-based programs provided benefits to teaching and learning. Students believed that Keystone helped them learn the skills necessary to be successful in high school. Most teachers reported liking the course but some teachers thought the curriculum was not relevant to students’ needs and needed to be more rigorous. Teaming also was perceived to increase teacher continuity including the development and sharing of common teaching practices and cross-curricular lessons but I was unable to confirm any such benefits. Students attested an increase in student collaboration and support as a result of teaming. Additionally, School B’s “Eagle Mall” along with their after school credit recovery program purportedly encouraged and increased student learning.

Educators in School B appeared to understand that committing to an exemplary educational experience for ninth graders involved the support of the entire school. Faculty and staff buy-in and support, selection of appropriate freshman academy teachers, staff development opportunities, and the discontinuation of the grant were thought to add to the culture of commitment to ninth-grade success. First, teachers reported a need for increased administrative support. Administrators believed that most teachers were invested in the freshman academy

program. Second, a careful selection of ninth-grade teachers was expressed as a necessary component to the overall effectiveness of School B's freshman academy. Third, all those I spoke with affirmed that more professional development opportunities were necessary to improve the quality of School B's commitment to ninth-grade students. Lastly, the discontinuation of the grant was thought cause problems for the full implementation of School B's freshman academy.

CHAPTER 6 SCHOOL C

I couldn't imagine going to work in a high school and nothing being done for ninth graders anymore because it doesn't make sense at all when you see how helpful it is to the kids, when they just feel that they're supported once they get there.

–Mrs. Hillington, Cslcci,2-p1

Organization and Subculture

School C was a large, 50-year-old urban high school with a total school enrollment of approximately 2170, of which 650 were freshmen. As of the 2006-2007 school year, 42% of the student population was White, 27% was Hispanic, 26% was Black, 3% was multi-racial, and 2% was Asian/Pacific Islander. Forty-seven percent of the student population qualified for free and reduced lunches.¹ School C's demographics mirrored both the community it served and Florida's student demographics. In a conversation with Mr. Broadaway, principal of School C, he said, "our demographics are very much society and that's what I tell parents, 'When you go to the mall, you see what you do here'" (Mr. Broadaway, Clfg-p3).

School C experienced a change in leadership during the 2005-2006 school year, as their principal took on a district-level position and a former assistant principal was hired to fill the position. School C had about 50% veteran faculty with 20 or more years' experience and 50% relatively new faculty with less than five years teaching experience. A majority of the veteran teachers were alumni of School C who spent their entire teaching careers at the school.

According to School C's principal, "...we joke about it but some of these people around here bleed school colors" (Mr. Broadaway, Clfg-p4). School C reported a low teacher turnover rate.

Additionally, School C had numerous alternatively certified teachers.

¹ Data gathered from personal communication with Principal on 4-25-07.

During the 2002-2003 school year, the school district applied for a federal small learning community grant; School C was included in the grant application. This school, as with both of the other schools highlighted in the present study, did not make Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years. They also had a large student population,² knew they were having difficulties reaching their ninth-grade student population, and had a faculty who expressed interest in establishing small learning communities. At the time of the grant, School C had a graduation rate of approximately 75.5% and their ninth-grade retention rate was 8.9% [School district objectives, Archival]. Teachers and administrators knew they were not reaching every student. Mrs. Matingly, a School C community leader expressed it this way,

...[I]t's an awful joke, but teachers used to joke about the 700 club. You would start off with a 1000 freshmen and you would graduate 300 and as bad of a joke as that was, it was reality and we had to do something to prevent drop out. [Mrs. Matingly, Clfg-p15]

Upon receiving the grant, school personnel decided to implement the House design, a type of small learning community. The entire school faculty and student population were divided into "vertical houses," or multi-grade small learning communities, based on the following career areas: Business and Communications, Human Services, Liberal Arts, and Natural Sciences. Freshmen were divided based upon career interest and placed in one of the four small learning communities. Within each community, ninth-grade students and teachers were further divided into freshman transition teams who together made up School C's freshman academy. Occasionally teachers were assigned to multiple grade level teams within their community and, at times, across communities. In some instances, students also were cross-teamed. Freshman teams usually consisted of English, government, reading, Keystone, science and, less frequently, mathematics teachers. These teachers taught the same ninth-grade students and had a common

² The student population was 2,044 at the time the grant was written.

planning period. Homerooms were determined by the team within the community. Keystone, the freshman transition course, was taught in both the fall and spring semesters. Students were scheduled into seven core and elective classes based on a traditional 50 minute period day.

A small pilot group of 300 ninth-grade students was teamed the first year. By the fourth year, all ninth-graders were on freshman transition teams. Teaming within communities was not implemented until the fourth year of the grant. Throughout all focus groups and interviews, teaming was the single most talked about initiative. Mr. Broadway, principal of School C, stated, “I’ve said it before that the teaming is the best thing we did this year” [Mr. Broadway, Cai-p6]. Many teachers believed teaming was a good concept. Teachers referred to teaming at the middle level when talking about its purported benefits.

The administration at School C seemed to understand the importance of scheduling pure student-teacher teams. Administrators spoke of the hardships associated with keeping both the ninth-grade teams within each community pure, since the sheer number of course offerings, as well as specialty classes and academic course offerings (honors, advanced placement), posed substantial scheduling issues. Most teams reported having about 40% purity, with some teams reporting slightly less. Teachers believed the freshman teams did not have enough students in common to truly reap the optimum benefits teaming could afford.

[W]hen we come here and we do meet because we do have a common planning period, it does not mean that Mr. Kurts [another freshman team member] and I have any kids in common. Or a lot of times you go through the list and you might have one student. That has been an issue. But that’s some of what I’ve seen as the ongoing issue. We don’t necessarily have those kids in common. So, the whole gist of what we’re actually supposed to be able to do doesn’t always work. [Mrs. Honors, Ctfg,b-p1]

Reportedly due to the vision of wanting freshmen to be an integral part of the entire school community, School C did not implement proximity. Administrators believed freshmen needed to be a part of, not separated from, the total student body.

You want the kids to have a sense of belonging but you want them to fit in with the whole student body. To isolate them to a certain part of the building is that the best? I'm not a strong believer in that. [Mr. Broadaway, Cai-p9]

Not all faculty members supported the decision to not institute proximity. Some teachers thought proximity of freshman team classrooms would have increased the sense of being on a team.

School C had one lead teacher per community, a ninth-grade lead teacher, and a Keystone coordinator. In addition to a typical teacher load, one lead teacher managed each small learning community. The ninth-grade lead teacher oversaw the daily functions of the freshman academy. The Keystone coordinator helped organize the freshman transition course curriculum and activities. The lead teachers were given a stipend funded by the small learning community grant. Both the ninth-grade lead teacher and the Keystone coordinator were volunteer positions. With the exception of having a ninth-grade lead teacher, summer orientation, and the Keystone course, some teachers expressed that the ninth-grade academy was not much different from what was done for upperclassmen.

I don't know if you all would disagree but as far as the things outside the Keystone, I don't know that we do a whole lot different for our ninth graders than we do our tenth or eleventh graders. And I think that may be one of the weaknesses of our freshman academy. It's not any different than our tenth and eleventh grade academies. We do the Keystone class. We do the freshman orientation before school starts. But I don't think we do anything particularly extra. We have Mrs. Wilkinson in that position who probably tracks the freshman and catches ones who are really off track with five and six F's. But I don't think we do anything on a daily basis. [Mr. Hubert, Ctfg,a-p5]

It was School C's mission to create a successful learning environment where everyone is connected and supported. School C's small learning community mission statement read,

We, the smaller learning communities of School C, will provide a safe and successful academic environment by increasing student reading comprehension, creating a sense of belonging for all students, and providing support for both students and teachers. [School C's SLC mission statement, Archival]

Faculty and staff at School C wanted to establish a smaller, more personalized learning community for all their students, especially ninth graders. The following paragraphs will

elaborate on School C's freshman academy and how it might have helped students make the transition to high school. The following domains will be examined: the extent to which their freshman academy created opportunities for students to develop a sense of belonging, foster a supportive and collaborative learning environment, focus on teaching and learning, and establish a culture of commitment to ninth-grade success. Each domain highlights the voices of School C's administrators, teachers, and students.

Sense of Belonging to School Community

Helping students get connected and develop a sense of belonging to their school is an integral part of easing the transition to high school (Cushman, 2006; Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999, Mac Iver, 1990; Mizelle, 2005; Osterman, 2000; Queen, 2002). Based on both personal conversations and archival data, school personnel appeared to be committed to helping incoming ninth graders establish a sense of belonging [School C 2004 newsletter & mission statement, Archival]. As Mr. Broadaway, Principal of School C, stated

...[W]e need to find something for those ninth graders to hook onto so they have a sense of belonging. They need to become a stakeholder in the school and not just a lonesome fish swimming in the sea. [Mr. Broadaway, Cai-p1]

Faculty and staff at School C sought to help their incoming ninth graders develop a sense of belonging by creating opportunities for students to make connections early and by continuing to offer chances for students to build connections throughout their freshman year.

Establishing Connections Early

Faculty and staff aimed to help incoming ninth graders establish a sense of belonging by collaborating with their feeder middle school. Working together, School C and their major feeder middle school reportedly planned activities for incoming students' during eighth grade year to help students begin the transition process. Additionally, summertime events such as summer camp and freshman orientation were offered to help students make the transition to high school.

Feeder Middle School

School C had one major feeder middle school but also received students from numerous other local middle schools. Through the collaborative efforts of leadership from School C and leadership from their major middle school, many ideas intended to help students make a smooth transition to high school were discussed and implemented. For example, School C's principal and small learning coordinator spoke of sending staff to their major feeder middle school each spring to talk with students about high school, their small learning communities, and student expectations. During these meetings, students would also receive information on summer camp and freshman orientation.

Summer Camp

For the past three years, School C hosted an optional multi-day summer camp for every incoming freshman and his/her parent(s). During summer camp, students and parents attended mini-sessions taught by various ninth-grade teachers. In these sessions, students and parents learned basic skills on how to be successful in ninth-grade classes. These classes included orientations on note taking and time management, the differences between middle school and high school, and adolescent development. Many ninth-grade teachers were available to speak directly with their future students about their classes. During summer camp, students had the opportunity to participate in field day activities such as Frisbee toss, water relay, and other team building exercises. On the last day of the camp, parents were invited to attend a special session where school faculty talked about upcoming struggles their students might face, were informed about the statistics on ninth-grade retention, and were given ways they could help their children be successful in ninth grade at School C.

Freshman Orientation

Started prior to the small learning communities grant, school personnel held a “pep rally-like” freshman orientation day full of events to help incoming freshmen and their parents acclimate themselves to School C. After receiving the small learning communities grant, they expanded the program and connected it more to their small learning communities. Hundreds of students and parents attended freshman orientation each year. The entire day was focused on ninth graders. They toured the school, attended an orientation session, met faculty during a barbeque lunch, signed up for clubs and sports, met the ninth-grade sponsor, purchased school clothing, and participated in a scavenger hunt. Students also received both their tentative schedule and student identification card. School faculty and staff reported the importance of communicating that they cared about freshmen and wanted them to be successful.

I think the Freshman Orientation has been a great thing because it gets them involved. Being a coach I sit there at my booth on Freshman Orientation and kids walk by and I say, “Hey, come play for me. I’ll just call them over by name and they’ll sign up.” I’ve had kids who’ll come out and the parents said they just came out because someone cared enough to talk to them. They may not stay but it’s just that getting them involved from the beginning. This is their day. Show them something special in the school system. [Mr. Jettings, Ctfg,a-p6]

Staying Connected

Administrators and teachers reported spending the first weeks of school helping students develop a sense of belonging. Keystone, the freshman transition class, appeared to play a role in helping students immediately connect with faculty, staff, and students at School C. School personnel also tried to help freshmen continue to develop their sense of belonging by being a part of not only a small learning community, but also a freshman academy team within the community. Despite their reported efforts, all students interviewed expressed the belief that they had to adjust on their own, thought Keystone was not beneficial, and they expressed a lack of

connection to their community and freshman team. Furthermore, some students expressed, that at times, they were excluded from School C's student body.

Intense Focus on the First Weeks of School

Faculty and staff believed they could help students build a sense of belonging and attachment through Keystone, their freshman transition course. Designed for freshmen, this class offered a safe environment where a heterogeneous group of ninth graders could talk about their needs, concerns, and feelings. The purpose of the course was to help students make the transition and learn the skills necessary to be successful in high school. Because Keystone was comprised of a heterogeneous group of ninth graders, students had the opportunity to meet and forge new friendships with students whom they might not otherwise meet in their classes.

[I]t's different levels too so it's not like, "I've been in with these kids in math and English." Keystone incorporates all the different levels so you meet people in Keystone from across the board and it kind of helps some of those cliques or groups to dissolve....In Keystone they can make friends in the different groups which makes it more comfortable to go to the lunchroom. It makes it more comfortable to go to other classes and in the hallway and share lockers and all that kind of stuff that I think high school's all about. [Mrs. Matingly, Clfg,p-2]

Students expressed frustrations toward the heterogeneity of students in their Keystone classes. They mentioned that not all their Keystone classmates wanted to learn; in fact, three students reported that many of their classmates attempted to make learning difficult for everyone.

Keystone was designed to help students not only acclimate to School C but also to offer opportunities for students to work on the skills necessary to develop deep, positive relationships and adjust to the increased freedom high school affords. Andy, a student at School C, mentioned having to adjust to the increase in freedom.

When we go to lunch we can do whatever we want whereas in middle school we had to ask for a pass to go to the bathroom and whatever but in high school we can just do whatever we want. [Andy, Csfg-p2]

Some students reported having a difficult time adjusting to the increased freedom while others welcomed the freedom.

During every teacher focus group and individual teacher interview teachers expressed that Keystone was designed to help students adjust to high school life, establish a sense of belonging to the school community, and develop the skills necessary for high school success. Students learned about School C's history and traditions. They met School C's staff and learned where to go if they needed help. Additionally, in Keystone, students learned how to get involved in extracurricular activities, make good decisions, work as a team, be proactive, develop solid relationships and interpersonal skills, and work on developing positive communication skills [Keystone course curriculum guide].

When students were asked about adjusting to high school, they expressed a sense of being overwhelmed by the sheer size of School C, surprised by the diversity of School C's student population, and shocked by the lack of respect some students had for other students. Many mentioned having a hard time meeting friends and finding their way around campus. Most students spoke of going to the wrong classes, and how they carried a school map with them during the first weeks of schools. Students believed they had to adjust to high school on their own.

I just kind of got here and I felt the vibe of like you're not in middle school anymore, you're not a baby so I think I went up to Mr. B with my map and he was just looking at me like [quizzical look], and I was like "Okay, never mind. Don't help me." [Elena, Csfg-p3]

Some students did mention that the upperclassmen occasionally offered assistance. One student compared surviving in high school to a "battlefield" where they had to dodge things in order to survive. Overall, all students agreed that neither school faculty and staff nor Keystone helped them adjust to high school, especially because some of them did not have the Keystone course during their first semester of high school.

Due to scheduling, many students at School C had to wait until their spring semester to enroll in Keystone. Students expressed their frustrations with taking a transition course during the second half of their ninth grade year.

They give it the name Keystone and you think you're going in there you're going to learn about like what everything is but when you get second semester there's no point in it because you already know where everything is because you've already had to find you're way around it. [Elena, Csfsg-p18-19]

Overall, students enrolled in Keystone during their spring semester did not perceive it to be necessary.

Uniting Freshmen

School C's student population was divided into four career-focused learning communities, with at least one freshman transition team per community/house. As a result, freshman students had the opportunity to identify themselves as a member of School C, a community member, and a freshman team member. Many teachers believed students identified more with being a member of School C than a member of a particular community or freshman team.

I think the kids, if anything, feel an alliance more towards the school rather than any particular smaller entity within it. I think it's too confusing for them. [Mr. Kurts, Ctfsg, b-p3]

Initially, teachers thought the community structure might help students develop a sense of identity and belonging to something special. Once implemented, teachers realized that their ninth grade students were confused about the community structure which hindered students' sense of identity and belonging. They expressed that more community and freshmen team focused activities might have helped alleviate their confusion.

I feel it could have more of an influence if the kids felt that they were a little more united as a group within that core. There's never been anything done to try to make them feel united as a group. We do assemblies and things like that to make them feel like they are a part of a community but it's taking that one step further to make them feel a part and build connections with their teachers and everything else. Like a field day or something to build

that type of relationship and make them feel as if they are a part of a whole. Because right now, I think they still feel as if they're everywhere. [Mrs. Honors, Ctfgr,p2-3]

When students were asked to describe their community and freshman team, none was able to communicate about either in any detail. Instead, students spoke of their freshman student body. When probed about their team, students responded, "We're never divided up by our team or something. It's just by like homeroom" [Elena, Csfg-p5]. Students believed they were never really part of a team or a community, "There is really no difference...it is just basically grouping" [KT, Csfg-p5].

When asked about their *eighth-grade* team, students were able to accurately describe their teams and spoke of doing social activities that bonded them as a group, "Like a little family, a little fraternity" [Carey, Csfg-p6]. In eighth grade, students expressed being a member of a team but they did not believe they were part of a team in ninth grade. When asked if there was anything they liked about their freshman academy and freshman team, students again reiterated that they really could not tell they were part of a group.

CAREY: Last year, you could tell this group is a team and this group is a team. Now it's just like there's no team.

ELENA: This year you can't tell so it's like nothing really different. It's just kind of like ninth graders are shoved in one area. [Csfg-p11]

It seemed as though students understood what it meant to be on a team because of their middle school experience, but did not believe there was a team and community at School C. Students also mentioned being excluded from School C's student body, "Most freshman are excluded from the student body at School C" [Ramon, Csfg-p13]. To students, being excluded meant that upperclassmen received privileges and flexibility not offered to freshmen.

Supportive and Collaborative Learning Environment

The importance of a supportive and collaborative ninth-grade learning environment can be found in the small learning community literature (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007). Administrators at School C attempted to support both teachers and students by organizing them in ways that fostered a smaller, more personalized learning environment, whereby increased opportunities for communication and support were possible. Both the community structure and freshman transition teams reportedly allowed faculty to communicate with people from various academic disciplines, offered opportunities to talk about and help students who might otherwise have gone unnoticed, and offered support programs and support personnel focused on helping students.

Teacher-to-Teacher Communication

Due to the community structure, many teachers found themselves talking to both their team members and members of their community/house. Once a month, each community had a scheduled opportunity to meet with each other to discuss community-related topics and individual students. Additionally, each week teachers had an opportunity to meet as a freshman teacher team to discuss similar students. Because of teaming and the community structures, teachers reported communicating with other teachers to whom they normally would not talk to in the traditional, departmentalized high school structure. Teacher-to-teacher communication is noted to have increased the cohesiveness of School C's faculty.

Mrs. C in consumer science and I got to interact with Ms. R from science and Ms. N. [B]ecause of the team, the community environment, I've met her daughter, her daughter's family, and I got to see that Mr. W isn't scary as I thought he was. He really has a great personality and he's very involved and I think that I it got over, "I'm a social studies teacher and I must interact with social studies. [Mrs. Matingly, Clfg-p5]

Teachers expressed meeting some of their colleagues for the very first time as a result of communities and teaming. Many teachers believed a true sense of community emerged as a result of teaming.

Student-Centered Talk

Teachers on the same team were also given a common planning period to meet, work on curriculum integration, and talk about students. During both their team meetings and their common planning period, teachers found themselves talking about students they all shared. As a result, they were able to focus on students who might have previously gone unnoticed.

Furthermore, teachers seemed to realize that other teachers shared similar struggles, often with the same student(s). Allowing time for teachers to talk to each other about students helped both teachers and students.

What they found was they were finding common students that were brought up all the time that might have fallen through the cracks prior because teachers wouldn't talk to each other about them. A lot of times if a student failed my class I took it personally like, "you're not trying. You're not motivated." What we found was when teachers were discussing amongst themselves the personal issue gets put aside and now it becomes a student issue. And in high school a lot of teachers take it personally. You're failing my class because you don't like it or you don't like me. So, now we've got teachers talking to each other. And it's teachers outside of the department. [Mrs. Wilkinson, Cfli-p2]

By having the opportunity to talk to one another about common students, many teachers were able to gain a deeper understanding of what students needed in order to be successful.

Ultimately, they believed students reaped the benefits of teachers having the opportunity to talk to each other. They believed that through teacher-to-teacher communication students would realize they were known, cared for, and important.

In a meeting I mentioned, "I have this student. Her name is Linda and she has just dropped off the face of the earth as far as I'm concerned and she's in all advanced placement classes." The next day by the time she got to my class seventh period, she's like, "Ms. M, what did you say because every teacher has been asking me, 'Linda, you've got to keep up in AP Economics. You can't drop off in that class. You know your grades are important. Just because you're a senior and have been accepted to college, you can't stop.'" By the

time she got to seventh period she's like, "What did you say because I have heard it all day long?" [Mrs. Matingly, Clfg-p7]

However, during the student focus group, many of School C's freshmen mentioned believing that no one cared for or respected them.

You don't have like a purpose. Like eighth grade you'd come to school and be like, "Oh, I'm on this team and like you know, I have friends and I have fun and I have teachers that care about me," and it's kind of like, you're kind of like, "This is school," and then you come to high school and it's like nobody respects you. You're like the lowest on the totem pole so people look down on you and your teachers have zero respect for you just as a person and they don't think we have feelings. [Elena, Csfg-p11]

Teaming, teachers communicating care, having a purpose, and respecting one another was important to these students. Simply stated, "They're saying 'we are the keys to success here' but we are not feeling it" [Ramon, Csfg-p13].

Increased teacher communication and collaboration appears to have resulted in the formation of a student accountability system. Reportedly, students were held more accountable for their actions and could no longer go unnoticed, "It's just a lot of those kids, you know, we use that expression, they fall through the cracks. They like to remain anonymous. Well, you can't be anonymous" [Mr. Broadaway, Clfg-p9]. Some thought that small learning communities and the ninth-grade-transition team offered a supportive network for students whereby anonymity and lack of accountability were no longer options.

That's one thing I saw develop over the years was accountability. The kids knew they were going to be held accountable, people knew their name, and they were going to be reported to somebody. If they were having an issue whether it be academic, emotional, physical, whatever it might be there was a support network there for them. [Mrs. Hillington, Cslcci,2-p2]

Although purity of teams reportedly was an issue, teachers and occasionally support staff still held meetings as a team with students who were having trouble in school, even if the students did not have all the teachers on the team. Often, during the common planning period, a team of teachers would arrange for a student-teacher-parent intervention. When necessary, the

freshman lead teacher, counselors, and administrators also were available to attend interventions.

Teachers thought these meetings sent a clear message to students that at School C they were important and a support network was available to help them succeed in high school.

We might only have one teacher that had this student on the team but the kid walks in with seven faces they don't recognize and they're like, "Why am I here?" and we said, "Because you're failing five of your seven classes. We want to know why." We had one girl tell us that she was pregnant. We had one girl tell us that she got suspended and she couldn't make up the work. At least they came in and saw seven teachers that said, "We know you're not doing well."... You may have kids say, "I'm not doing well because I don't have a planner." I'll say, "Well, I'll buy you a planner and if you don't pull up your grades, you owe me the five bucks." Let me tell you, every week he had to check in with me and I would see him in the halls and he's like, "I'm doing better." When he showed me his report card, he ended up with only one F. As far as I'm concerned going from five Fs to one F was better than nothing. So he's like, "I still have my planner," and I said, "If that's all it took was getting you another planner, we can fix that problem." You should have seen his face though when he walked in to that meeting. He was like, "I don't know any of y'all and why am I here?" [Mrs. Matingly, Clfg-p9].

School C's freshman academy included a referral system for freshmen, which was intended to provide additional student support. Prior to writing an official referral, teachers would fill out a referral form and send it to the small learning community coordinator's office. She would work with the student, his/her parent(s) in an attempt to rectify the situation before an official referral was written.

During the 2005-2006 school year, School C had an assistant principal solely responsible for ninth graders. By having an administrator overseeing the freshman class, School C was able to pull together all aspects of the child—academic, behavioral, emotional—and to address issues with the best interests of the whole child at heart. However, School C was unable to schedule a ninth-grade-only administrator for the 2006-2007 school year.

School C had a ninth-grade lead teacher throughout all four years of the grant. This teacher, in addition to her full teaching load, worked with the freshmen to insure academic

success. Every nine weeks, she met with each student who failed one or more classes and/or had multiple absences.

By having personnel assigned solely to the ninth grade, teachers thought it sent the message that freshmen were indeed important and that people on staff besides their teachers were dedicated to their wellbeing. During the student focus group interview, students expressed their belief that administrators only took the time to get to know “the bad kids” and never really made a connection with the rest of the freshman class.

Student Support Programs

During 2006-2007, the fourth year of the small learning communities grant, every student was assigned a grade-level homeroom staffed by a teacher in their community. The major focus of homeroom was to provide an advisory period for students. Additionally, both grade-level and community-based activities took place during homeroom. Community lead teachers spoke of a tremendous amount of teacher resistance to making homeroom an advisory period.

Our homeroom met twice a week so we figured that it could be used as an advisory. We started out with activities and team building stuff just figuring those ninth grader teachers would loop and next year move on to tenth grade with them. But it's aggravating because we hit such resistance with, “I don't want to do this ridiculous activity with my ninth graders. Every kid doesn't want to do this.” And it may be one kid in the class that throws a hissy fit that he doesn't want to do this. He just wants to put his head down and read or something. But the teacher would totally stop, “I don't want to do this stupid activity. This is a waste of my time 40 minutes twice a week.” [Mr. Hubert, Ctfg,a-p3-4].

Mrs. Wilkinson, the freshman-lead teacher, also spoke of numerous teachers' complaint about advisory activities. These teachers thought the activities were absurd and not interesting.

Although the idea was good, the implementation of an advisory-like homeroom period, reportedly, was not well received by all faculty members.

Freshman-Focused Teaching and Learning

Freshman academies are noted in the literature to encourage the use of common teaching strategies, integrate curriculum across subject areas, utilize a variety of teaching strategies, and offer a student-focused curriculum aimed at helping freshman successfully make the transition to high school (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007). Throughout the month of May 2007, I observed two classrooms per team at School C, for a total of eight classroom observations. Most of the teaching strategies witnessed were lecture and worksheet-based seatwork. Although I witnessed students learning, to various degrees, in all eight of the classrooms visited, three of the classrooms visited, (Mr. Huber, Mrs. Honors, and Mr. Jettings), appeared to be learning environments where teachers and students worked together to increase their level of understanding [School C classroom observations, 5-1-07 & 5-8-07]. During the student focus group interview, students mentioned that in their classes, they mostly took notes and listened to lectures but would rather be in what they termed a fun environment where they learned by playing games and group work. They spoke of Mr. Huber's class as being one of the only fun yet educational classes they had all year. It seemed that having fun while learning was important to students.

Most teachers in the classrooms visited expressed the need for students to understand that everything, including credits, GPA, and FCAT, counts in high school and they cannot wait until their sophomore years to start doing well in school. The "you're in high school now" atmosphere was apparent. When asked if the freshman academy concept affected how they taught and how students learned, teachers at School C expressed the belief that the freshman academy really had little influence on their teaching methods or the way students learned.

R: How about the way in which this concept may have affected the way you teach or the way your kids learned?

MRS. HONORS: I don't think we've had the chance or the opportunity to really build upon that as much yet. You know?

MR. KURTS: Umhmm. [Ctfg,b-p4]

Three ways the freshman academy concept reportedly did affect teaching and learning was through the freshman transition course, Keystone, by encouraging continuity among teacher teams, and by offering academic incentive and support programs.

Freshman Transition Course

At some point during their freshman year, every student at School C enrolled in a half-credit elective course called Keystone. Keystone was a transition course specifically designed to help freshmen learn personal, career, and school development skills in a supportive and structured environment.

...[A]ny structuring we did for the ninth grade, we looked at the group of kids we were dealing with who need so much support, structure, assistance and hand holding which is normal in my opinion.[Mrs. Hillington, Cslcci,2p3]

The course objective was to prepare ninth-grade students to be more effective, caring, supportive, and successful in their high school environment [School C Keystone syllabus, archival]. Like the other schools, School C utilized the school district's Keystone curriculum. Students reportedly learned important skills such as how to calculate their GPA, how best to respond to a bully, and what it meant to be proactive. Effective in 2007, students were required to keep a portfolio of student work that was intended to move with them into the career academy.

During a teacher focus group conversation, Mr. Jetting's, a Keystone teacher, shared a conversation he had with one of his Keystone students earlier in the day that asked why he liked teaching Keystone.

[I]t's because I get to talk to you about life. In 20 years you're probably not going to care less about Pythagoras's theory is or how it even works but if you know how to solve a conflict appropriately. It's life application. I don't have to drill a textbook into your head and say this is what I want you to learn. It's life application. It's test taking. It's study

skills. It's time management. It's things that not only with education will give you a benefit but when you get into life these are really great skills. [Mr. Jettings, Ctfg,a-p5]

Overall, School C's Keystone course reportedly focused on life skills—the personal, academic, and career skills assumed necessary to be successful in high school and beyond.

I had an opportunity to observe one Keystone class during her time at School C. During this observation, students were learning about conflict resolution. Teaching both through his personal life examples and realistic school examples, the teacher and his students brainstormed to find possible ways to appropriately respond to conflict scenarios. A fruitful discussion arose based on how to best respond to conflict. Many students asked insightful questions such as “How do you control your feelings if you can't confront them?” [student in Mr. Jettings Keystone class, class observation, 5-8-07]. Most students in the class appeared engaged in the conversation throughout the observation. This classroom observation seemed to verify teacher reports of the benefits of such a course.

Students that participated in School C's student focus group had a different perception of Keystone. Many students said that, although they appreciated that their school was finally trying to help freshmen, they were dissatisfied with the way Keystone was taught.

ELENA: I don't need somebody to tell me, “Hey this how you need to survive high school.” I mean I can find it out on my own. I don't need somebody to be like, “Okay, you have to plan out your goals and do these five steps.” Nobody's going to sit down and be like, “Okay, let me pull out my paper with my five steps. Okay, step number one.” Nobody's going to sit there and do that.

CAREY: And I like that they finally like tried to help, but the way they did it, they might as well not even tried. [Csfg-p19]

Some students bluntly stated their disliked of the course claiming it was a “space filler” and “just common sense.” Overall, students did not believe they learned much from the course.

Continuity Between Classes

Through sharing similar teaching practices and reinforcing information learned in other classes, teachers at School C spoke of trying to help their students see connections between classes. Cross-curricular lessons were noted as one way to help students see connections between subjects. However, the lack of purity appeared to be a major problem hindering the continuity between classes.

Teachers at School C said that being consistent in their teaching practices helped students develop a sense of group identity and made it easier for them to be successful. Numerous teachers also reported positive benefits of collaborating and reinforcing information learned in another class. Cross-curriculum lessons and activities seemed to emerge naturally out of teacher teaming and collaboration.

[W]hat happened on my particular team, Ms. N who teaches English and Mr. K who teaches social studies, they were able to say, “What lesson are you on?” “Okay. In English I need to have them read some stuff about World War I.” “Okay, I’m on World War I so why don’t you have them read this, this, and this,” and even though not every single student was in their class, they would come up with readings, come up with lessons, saying, “Okay, have you read this?” She was able to piggy back on the English side of it and it just worked well. [Mrs. Matingly, Clfg-p6-7]

In an attempt to increase cross-curriculum integration, at the beginning of the year, teachers from each community created a collaboration chart where they had to pick their five favorite activities that they teach and discuss common curricular links across the community. Collaboration and integration started to happen more naturally once teachers saw there were connections between subjects and created a plan on how to optimize those connections. Teacher collaboration and cross-curriculum teaching was reportedly hindered by the lack of pure teams.

[I]f Mr. Kurts is teaching something and I am doing something similar and we try to correlate but half of my kids don’t have him; it’s almost as if you would have to pin point every single English teacher and every single science teacher in the ninth grade. [Mrs. Honors, Ctfg,b-p4]

Overall, it seemed teachers at School C wanted more continuity but needed more students in common to truly reap the benefits of sharing similar teaching methods, reinforcing what was being taught in other classes, and doing lessons across the disciplines.

Celebrating Successes

School C's small learning coordinator mentioned that, prior to receiving the small learning community grant, no special programs existed for ninth graders. Four years later, she reported that numerous initiatives, including a functioning freshman academy, summer camp, Keystone, advisory-like homeroom, tutoring, proactive transition activities, teaming, and incentive-based programs existed. Mrs. Hillington stated, "The entire focus from the beginning of the grant until the end has been ninth graders" [Mrs. Hillington, Cslcci,2-p1]. As a result of their commitment to freshmen, School C's administration and teachers reported that referral rates went down, freshman hold-backs and failures decreased, attendance at tutoring increased, school attendance improved, and students seemed more comfortable seeking assistance.

Honoring those who improved seemed to be an important part of School C's freshman academy. Whether through the "Raising the Bar" program or by displaying the names of all students who made honor roll, School C created opportunities to recognize students for their academic improvement. "Raising the Bar," an academic incentive-based program, was designed to honor those ninth-grade students who raised a grade from one nine week grading period to the next. If a ninth grader showed academic improvement in a course, they received a certificate and, for each grade raised, the student's name was placed into a raffle to win gift certificates to local stores, including McDonald's and Target. Additionally, students that dramatically raised their grades in multiple classes were called into the principal's office and congratulated.

During a conversation with Mrs. Wilkinson, the ninth-grade lead teacher, she mentioned the large number of students making honor roll throughout the 2006-2007 school year. Each

marking period, all honor roll students were recognized by having their name displayed by grade level on a bulletin board in the main hallway of the school. Although Mrs. Wilkinson was proud of the large number of freshman honor role students, she was most impressed by the large sophomore honor role students. In her opinion, “the huge sophomore honor roll said that it [freshman academy and freshman-focused initiatives] worked” [Mrs. Wilkinson, Cfli-p8]. Later that day after speaking with Mrs. Wilkinson, I located the honor roll bulletin board. As Mrs. Wilkinson described, both the freshman and sophomore classes had a large group of students who made honor role for the third quarter grading period.

Academic Support Programs

Throughout the past four years, School C implemented various academic support programs aimed at helping every student achieve academic success. Peer tutoring and “Cougar Time” were academic support programs started at School C as a result of small learning communities and their desire to focus on ninth graders. Such programs reportedly provided great academic support for students.

Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring was one initiative first generated to help ninth graders but later expanded to a whole school initiative. Any student listed on the nine-week freshman failure list generated by the freshman lead teacher was recommended for peer tutoring held on Tuesdays and Thursdays during “Cougar Time.” Additionally, any academic teacher could write a pass for a student to attend tutoring. Selected high performing upperclassmen were asked to become “Special Tutors” who would tutor ninth graders for service points toward graduation. Reportedly, because of its popularity, the program expanded to include upperclassmen and was also offered every day of the week after school.

Cougar Time

“Cougar Time” was a unique 45 minute block of time scheduled every Tuesday and Thursday. During this time, all students at School C met with their homeroom teacher to focus on community/house-wide topics, grade-level topics, upcoming academic activities, extra academic assistance, and other advisory like activities. Teachers spoke of using this time to meet with grade-level teams, bring in guest speakers, offer peer tutoring, and host grade-level pep rallies such as the ninth-grade FCAT pep rally.

Culture of Commitment to Ninth-Grade Success

As with each of the schools mentioned in this study, faculty and staff members at School C appeared eager to create a freshman-focused culture. The small learning community coordinator, lead teachers, and numerous other ninth-grade teachers spoke to the importance of creating an atmosphere where everyone was committed to ninth-grade success. Freshman academy research suggests that all school personnel must be committed to providing a caring, safe, student-focused high school environment (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007; SREB, 2002). The following were identified by educators at School C as critical elements in the development of School C’s freshman-focused culture: selecting the right personnel, offering professional development opportunities, working within the parameters of the grant, and dealing with outside influences.

Complete Buy-in and Support

Reportedly, buy-in and support from upper level administration, including the principal, assistant principals, department heads, and community leaders, was necessary to keep School C’s small learning communities in existence. As stated by Mrs. Wilkinson, “We need a strong front to make this spread” [Mrs. Wilkinson, Cfli-p15]. Both faculty and staff spoke to the difficulty of

getting complete buy-in and support. This caused many problems, and some believed, ultimately led to the demise of School C's communities and freshman academy initiatives.

Administration

Throughout all four years of the small learning community grant, School C had numerous small learning community coordinators and assistants. Mrs. Hillington, School C's most recent small learning coordinator who took over in the fall of 2006, mentioned that School C had a hard time retaining someone in this position. In the fall of 2007, Mrs. Hillington left her position as small learning community coordinator to assume a district-level job. Since her departure, School C operated without a small learning community coordinator. Mrs. Wilkinson, the ninth-grade lead teacher, believed that losing both their small learning coordinator and their data processor during the middle of year four placed a tremendous strain on the program.

With the loss of the small learning community coordinator, we had little administrative support and teacher morale dropped. The small learning communities lost their backbone and the community leaders struggled to keep it above water. [2006-2007 Ninth-grade coordinator report, Archival]

School C also experienced a change in principal while implementing many of their small learning community and freshman academy initiatives. Numerous faculty and staff at School C believed their previous administration supported small learning communities. They expressed that, under previous leadership, all faculty were held accountable for their role in implementing freshman academy initiatives, but such accountability lost momentum after the change in leadership took place. Teachers appeared frustrated by what they perceived as being a lack of administrative support from their new leadership. For example, guidance was required to schedule homerooms by teams as requested and teachers believed that not much effort was placed into scheduling common teams. Many supporters of School C's communities and freshman academy expressed the desire for current administration to be more aggressive toward

the nay saying faculty. Instead, they believed that the current administration favored keeping the peace and going back to the old way of doing business.

Mr. Broadaway, principal of School C, spoke strongly about doing what was best for students. His philosophy was that students come first and any initiative for students took highest priority. Mr. Broadaway talked about his support for and commitment to keeping freshman and sophomore initiatives but was not convinced that juniors and seniors needed to be in a community. Furthermore, due to the class size amendment, the pressure associated with balancing class sizes made the community concept extremely difficult. As Mr. Broadaway explained,

[T]hat's [master schedule] really going to be the challenge in the coming years because this year when those kids chose communities and we put them on teams, one community might have more kids on it than another community. So we have less teams in one community than another. Well, when you start manipulating that master schedule, the average class size in the liberal arts community might be 26, 27 kids. Then when you look in our natural sciences community, due to the number that you have and the number of teachers we're given school wide, the big picture, that community might end up averaging 29, 30. [Mr. Broadaway, Cai-p2]

Teachers

Teacher buy-in and support of both small learning communities and the freshman academy seemed to be extremely important. Some referred to teachers who supported the small learning community teachers as "cheerleaders" because their excitement for the program trickled down to both students and fellow teachers. Mrs. Hillington, School C's small learning community coordinator, reportedly was very good with soliciting teacher voice. Teachers were given opportunities to have their voices heard by making recommendations on ways to improve the small learning community concept and freshman academy. If possible, many recommendations were implemented the next school year. As Mrs. Hillington, stated, "If it could be done it was done for them" [Mrs. Hillington, Cslcci,1-p7]. Mrs. Hillington believed teachers started to trust

and buy-into the program because they knew their voices were heard and ideas were implemented. Additionally, in an effort to increase teacher buy-in, the small learning community coordinator held a lot of meetings to consistently communicate and stress the importance of School C's small learning communities.

At first, not all teachers supported the concept. Teachers at School C seemed to resist change. Mrs. Matingly, one of the community leaders, openly admitted not initially buying into the small learning community concept. She, along with other teachers, needed to be sold on the concept by seeing results before truly committing to the concept. As a former middle school teacher, she believed the concept worked at the middle level, but was skeptical about how it would work at the high school level. Mrs. Matingly stated that her skepticism diminished when she began to see results. She reported becoming a complete supporter of the concept and even took on a small learning community leadership role. As she expressed, "I was one of those digging in my heels. I was going, 'Yeah, right. Let's see,' and now I'm an advocate saying, 'You need to try and hang onto it'" [Mrs. Matingly, Clfg-p11].

During the latter years of the grant, School C's small learning community coordinator and community leaders believed they needed to increase the level of teacher accountability. Because School C was a 50-year-old school rich in already established ways of doing things, it was very easy for teachers to simply not support new initiatives. Some teachers reported regularly attending their community and team meetings. These teachers spoke of other educators that never attended community and teams meetings without any repercussions for their lack of participation. As a result, during year four of the grant, the small learning coordinator created a series of reports to increase accountability. The increase in accountability among community

leaders reportedly helped community leaders hold their fellow community and team members responsible.

Additionally, many knew the grant was coming to an end. As Mrs. Wilkinson said, “I think they were just waiting for the grant to end, ‘All right, its done,’ because they were not accountable for anything anymore” [Mrs. Wilkinson, Cfli-p13]. Many new and veteran teachers reportedly had the “this too shall pass” mindset. Teachers at School C spoke of many reform movements that have come and gone over the past years often leaving behind empty promises. Teachers seemed to perceive that small learning communities were just another fad that would die with time; therefore, some teachers thought that select colleagues never wholeheartedly committed to the concept.

The biggest thing that we find is that teachers resist change. They resist change because there have been so many changes that have fallen through and they anticipate that it’s just another. [Mrs. Wilkinson, Cfli-p]

Those committed to the small learning community and freshman academy concept expressed that “those on the border” were able to be swayed and, with time and persistence, would see the benefits of the concept and join in. Some teachers never bought into the small learning community and freshman academy concept. Faculty and staff at School C referred to these people as “rocks.” They even had a saying, “don’t water the rocks.” As Mrs. Wilkinson stated,

The people that were south of the border we knew they were the rocks and were just going to leave them. Let them grumble amongst themselves. We weren’t going to let them affect us. [Mrs. Wilkinson, Cfli-p15]

With the change in leadership, the “rocks” became more outspoken. Reportedly, teachers began refusing to do anything extra to help assist the communities. For example, during year four, teachers were asked to fill out a failure form during their 45-minute extended homeroom. Because the form was not an official school board form, some teachers took the form to the

teachers' association. The teachers' association informed School C that the form must be placed on committee review before anyone could be asked to fill it out. As a result, School C had to ask teachers to *voluntarily* fill out the failure list form during homeroom so that it could be used to generate a student failure list to pinpoint students in need of tutoring. Teachers spoke of many similar scenarios where a “few squeaky wheels” were able to stop initiatives designed to help students.

Selecting the Right Personnel

Echoing the findings from both School A and B, teachers and administrators at School C believed it was imperative to select the right personnel, “I think the teacher in the classroom is more important than any structure you can build” [Mr. Hubert, Ctfg,a-p2]. It seemed the ninth-grade academy was only as good as those teachers selected to be on freshman transition teams. As Mrs. Hillington stated, “You can have all the best programs in place but if the teachers aren’t good teachers and they’re not good with ninth graders then you might as well not do it” [Mrs. Hillington, Cslcci,2-p6]. School C’s faculty made it very clear that ninth-grade teachers needed to have certain qualities. They believed ninth-grade educators needed to have patience, be solid disciplinarians, enjoy working with younger adolescents, be willing to give a lot of guidance, take the time to talk to students, and be willing to be flexible and adjust teaching practices to best serve their students.

School C realized they needed to do a better job of selecting freshman academy teachers, “[W]e found that a lot of the freshman issues we had were the teachers that were in there. We had some bad teachers with our freshmen” [Mrs. Wilkinson, Cfli-p8-9]. During the student focus group interview, one student commented on teacher selection, “It just doesn’t seem like they take time in hiring the teachers” [Elena, Csfsg-p6]. Other students spoke of teachers disrespecting them and making no attempt to form a relationship. Some teachers even expressed frustration

toward administration as they believed administration could have done a better job of hand-selecting ninth-grade teachers.

Mrs. Wilkinson, School C's ninth-grade lead teacher, spoke of a teacher who was unsuccessful with her freshmen partly due to not reinforcing the best practices students were learning.

We have a high population of teachers who settle into teaching juniors and seniors and they teach them very well. So, we want them to teach freshmen but we know it won't be successful. They're just not freshman teachers. I've been dealing with a 50% failure rate for one teacher in math, Algebra I. How is that possible? She can't pass 50% of her students in that class. I observed her and checked her grading policy and everything. She set them up for failure. She broke every freshman initiative that we were teaching in Keystone. [Mrs. Wilkinson, Cfli-p9]

Mrs. Wilkinson believed all ninth-grade teachers needed to support the freshman initiatives and best practices students were learning in Keystone and their freshman academy. In her opinion, uniformity was critical and, in some instance, was lacking among freshman teachers.

Placement of teachers on teams was something administrators and the small learning community coordinator found to be very important. The 2006-2007 school year was the first year School C implemented teaming. They quickly found teachers needed to understand how to be a positive team player, a quality reportedly lacking in a few of School C's teachers. During teacher focus group interviews, many teachers spoke of colleagues that resisted the teaming concept both outwardly and passively.

Others expressed the importance of paying extra attention to the selection of Keystone teachers.

The biggest way to get success out of that class is by putting time into who you pick to teach it. Really. Because it could very quickly become the most beloved class in your school or the most hated in an instant and that all depends on who's instructing it. [Mrs. Hillington, Cslcci,1-p2]

It appeared that thoughtful selection of both community and freshman academy personnel was a critical, and sometimes missing element, to the overall effectiveness of School C's small learning community program.

Professional Development

Many at School C believed that school-wide reform requires solid, ongoing professional development, "It [small learning communities] won't happen without training. Period" [Mrs. Hillington, Cslcci,2-p5]. Through the small learning communities grant, faculty and staff at School C had many opportunities for professional development. Professional development opportunities included national conferences, small faculty group trainings, working with consultants, and mini-workshops. Opportunities to attend trainings on differentiated instruction, Keystone curriculum, and portfolio requirements were offered by the school district. Nationally recognized consultants came to School C to specifically address interdisciplinary teaming. Annually, School C's teacher teams attended an intense one-week training to learn about the latest research on how they could improve their small learning communities at School C. Additionally, a team of teachers presented at the Accomplished Teachers Academy.

Small Learning Community Grant

The school district received an implementation grant, not a planning grant. As a result, School C, like each of the school in this study, had very little time to plan for their small learning communities prior to implementation. As expressed by faculty and staff, since the original grant was for a three-year period, School C needed to have all structures and programs functioning by the end of the third year or else they would be in default.

[Y]ou needed to start seeing those things [structures and programs] in three years which is ridiculous when you have no planning grant. If I had a five-year planning grant and then implemented it in three years maybe you were going to start to seeing things eight years later. But in three years? That was what was so frustrating about managing the grant but they were very specific. [Mrs. Hillington, Cslcci,1-p12]

As year four approached, many teachers and administrators expressed the belief that their communities and freshman academy were finally beginning to function smoothly but were not yet able to operate without the structures and funding the grant provided. Unfortunately, they believed they were running out of time to get all the initiatives they wanted to implement started before the grant expired. The school district managed to receive an additional year of grant funding to help their schools implement the structures necessary to be in compliance with the original grant. Even with the additional year, many faculty at School C expressed the need for more time to get their communities operating smoothly.

The purpose of the implementation grant was to provide schools with extra financial assistance to help them get their programs started. It was left up to each school to devise a plan for how to sustain the programs. School C, along with the other schools in the present study, did not devise a detailed plan for continuing on with their programs. For example, community leaders and the Keystone lead teacher seemed to be very important to the sustainability of School C's small learning communities; yet no formalized plan on how to compensate their extra duties as a lead had been put into place prior to the expiration of the grant.

Outside Influences

Both the school district's decision to change the school schedule and teacher workload, along with the state's class size reduction amendment, affected the future of the small learning community program at School C. The school district decided to reconfigure school schedules and teacher workloads for the upcoming school year. As a result, in 2007-2008, teachers would teach six out of seven periods with one period for planning. Because of this change, teachers will be required to teach an additional class and will lose a planning period. In addition to district changes, the upcoming 2007-2008 school year would be the district's trial year for operating under the class size amendment law. Both the new teaching schedule and the class size reduction

amendment were predicted to place serious limitations on both teacher schedules and their time. At the end of year four when research for this project was gathered, Mr. Broadway talked about having to scale down the school-wide program due to these outside influences but continued to remain committed to the ninth and tenth grade initiatives. Many teachers expressed uncertainty as to what will happen next year.

Next year this time is used for 3 preps for 6 classes; 17 minutes per prep. For xeroxes, calls, etc. I just don't see realistically that there's the time in the day or the will or the means to do it after school. I don't think teachers would stay and volunteer to do something like that. [Mr. Kurts, Ctfg,b-p7].

The new teaching schedule and the class size amendment both will be additional obstacles that could hinder the full implementation of both School C's small learning communities and freshman academy.

Summary

Faculty and staff at School C attempted to help their incoming ninth graders develop a sense of belonging by creating opportunities for students to make connections to their new school early and remain connected throughout their freshman year. By working with their feeder middle school, school personnel met with incoming freshman to talk about high school life. Additionally, summer camp and freshman orientation were intended to help students socially and academically acclimate themselves to high school life. Special information sessions for parents were also offered at both events.

School personnel thought Keystone, the freshman transition class, played an important role in helping incoming freshman develop connections to their new school community, including school personnel and peers. Students did not believe that school faculty or their Keystone course, especially if enrolled during the spring semester, helped them adjust and establish a sense of belonging to their new school. Students reported being disconnected from the student body,

including a lack of connection to their community and freshman team. Overall, students expressed having to adjust to high school on their own.

School C's community structure and freshman transition teams were thought to help increase communication between faculty from various academic disciplines, offer opportunities to focus on individual students, and offer both support programs and support personnel. As a result of small learning communities, faculty reported meeting school faculty for the first time, creating a more collaborative, interdepartmental work environment. School personnel expressed the belief that teaming helped teachers focus on individual students. Teachers believed that such student-centered talk communicated to students that their teachers cared about them. During the student focus group interview, students expressed their belief that few teachers cared for them, giving them the impression that they were unimportant. In an effort to help further support students, School C implemented various support structures such as a student accountability system and an advisory-like homeroom. School personnel reported that despite the lack of commonality among teams, teams still held successful intervention meetings with numerous students. School C also had freshman-only support personnel, including an assistant principal, and freshman lead teacher.

Teachers did not believe the freshman academy concept dramatically influenced how they taught or how students learned. School personnel did express that the freshman academy affected teaching and learning by the implementation of Keystone, encouraging continuity among teacher teams, and offering academic incentive and support programs. School C's Keystone course was designed to prepare ninth-grade students to be more effective, caring, supportive, and successful students. Although school personnel believed the course had a positive impact on students, many

students indicated that they learned very little from taking the course, claiming it was a “space filler” and the curriculum was “common sense.”

Teachers asserted that the freshman academy did have some affect on teaching and learning, as they thought it helped students see connections between classes. Teaming helped teachers focus on sharing similar teaching practices, reinforce information learned in other classes, and develop cross-curricular lessons. However, the lack of purity was noted to be an issue that hindered continuity between classes.

School personnel expressed their steadfast commitment to ninth-grade success. They believed in the importance of helping students succeed and celebrating their achievements. Through their “Raising the Bar” incentive-based program and a student honor wall, students were recognized for their academic improvement. Academic support programs were designed to help students reach their potential. Peer tutoring and “Cougar Time” were implemented to help academically support students.

Faculty and staff at School C wanted to create a freshman-focused culture where everyone was committed to ninth-grade success. They believed selecting the right personnel, offering professional development opportunities, understanding the grant, and dealing with outside influences were critical elements that must be addressed in order to establish a culture of commitment to ninth-grade success. First, complete buy-in and support was thought to be necessary in order to establish a freshman-focused culture. Teachers expressed both the desire to have increased administrative support and greater teacher accountability. Second, every person I spoke with impressed the importance of carefully selecting ninth-grade faculty. Third, faculty and staff unanimously agreed additional professional development opportunities were necessary to properly implement freshman academy initiatives. Fourth, school personnel expressed

difficulties with working to implement the necessary grant components within the designated time period. Lastly, outside influences, such as the class size amendment and new school district schedule, reportedly affected faculty and staff perceptions of both the freshman academy and communities at School C.

CHAPTER 7 CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

In this study, I used a constructivist approach to apply the stage-environment fit theory to investigate one large school district's implementation of ninth-grade academies and how such academies might help students make the transition to high school in developmentally appropriate ways. Three schools in one large Florida school district participated in the present study. In 2002, this school district was awarded a federally funded, small learning community implementation grant to create small learning communities, including a freshman academy, in each of the three school's highlighted in this study. The perspectives of district and school leaders, small learning coordinators, teachers, and students were gathered through individual interviews and focus group interviews. Additionally, classroom observations and archival data were collected. All three schools presented in this study organized their small learning communities and freshman academy structures in different ways. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 describe each school's attempt at creating a developmentally appropriate freshman academy intended to help students adjust to high school. This chapter provides a detailed, cross-case analysis of all three school's attempt at implementing freshman academies in an effort to help their students make the transition to high school in ways that are developmentally appropriate.

In all three schools, the extent that the freshman academy personalized the learning environment stood out as being a critical factor in helping students make the transition from middle to high school. Small learning communities, including freshman academies, are noted for helping students make the transition from middle to high school, by establishing a more personalized, intimate, supportive, and cohesive school environment that focuses on student needs and academics (Cotton, 2001; CSRQC, 2005; Cushman, 2006; Dejong & Locker, 2006;

Fields, 2005; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; ICLE, 2004; Kerr, 2002; Letgers & Kerr, 2001; Queen, 2002; Sammon, 2007; SREB, 2002; USDOE, 2001).

This chapter focuses on the four domains used to frame each of the cases. Each domain attempts to explain aspects of how the three freshman academies highlighted in the present study might provide personalized environments intended to help students make the transition into high school. *Establishing a sense of belonging to the school community* focused each school's attempt to create a working relationship with its feeder middle school(s). This domain also explored the types of transition activities implemented before, during, and after the transition to high school that attempted to help students establish a sense of belonging. *A supportive and collaborative learning environment* looked at the types of opportunities educators in the freshman academy implemented in an effort to increase communication and support. *Freshman-focused teaching and learning* examined freshman academy programs and teaching methods for possible implications for developmentally appropriate methods of teaching and learning. *Culture of commitment to ninth-grade success* explored the perceived importance of complete buy-in, selecting the right freshman academy personnel, professional development, managing the small learning community grant, and dealing with outside influences. The current chapter consists of a discussion of each of the above-listed domains based on the cross-case analysis, including the district-level perspective.

Sense of Belonging to School Community

All three schools highlighted in the present study attempted to implement structures to help both students and parents begin to connect with their new high school. Faculty and staff from each school communicated with their feeder middle school in an attempt to establish transition events during students' eighth-grade year, offered a summer camp, and planned other forms of orientation-like events during the summer. Once school began, additional support structures,

such as Keystone and freshman transition teams, were implemented with the intention of helping students adjust to high school life.

Establishing Connections Early

Educators in all three schools attempted to communicate with their feeder middle school(s) in an effort to develop transition activities and programs during students' eighth-grade year and the summer prior to ninth grade. Educators in School A seemed to have a relatively new, yet solid working relationship with their one feeder middle school, evident through their springtime brainstorming session. Educators in School B expressed having difficulty with establishing a relationship with one of the feeder middle schools but mentioned a solid working relationship with their other middle school. Despite their reported inability to establish a relationship with one middle school, high school faculty and students visited both middle schools and arranged opportunities for eighth graders to tour and attend celebratory activities at School B. School C's small learning coordinator spoke of a solid working relationship with the major feeder middle school but did not mention doing any transitional activities with the additional feeder middle schools. All three schools sent administrators to speak to eighth-grade students. School A and B also arranged for upperclassmen to go to the middle school to talk with eighth graders and scheduled opportunities for high school visits.

All three schools offered some form of summer camp. Faculty and staff from each school spoke of summer camp as a time for students to get acquainted with their new school, meet teachers, administrators and upperclassmen, learn about courses and extracurricular activities, and generate excitement about high school. Each summer camp included team-building activities as well as information sessions. Educators in School B and C offered a multi-day summer camp that also focused on academics.

In addition to summer camp, each school offered programs aimed at supporting both incoming students and their parents prior to the first day of school. School A offered a parent night where parents had an opportunity to discuss curriculum, school activities, and student schedules. Additionally, parents were able to tour the school.

School B arranged multiple open houses during the summertime for parents and students to meet school faculty and tour the campus. School C's freshman orientation appeared to be the most elaborate of all the one-day, pre-school events. Students were given another opportunity to tour the school and meet faculty. They were also able to sign up for clubs and sports, meet the ninth-grade sponsor, purchase school clothing, and participate in a scavenger hunt. At the end of the day, students received both their tentative schedule and their high school student identification.

Despite each school's attempt to acclimate students early to their new environment, students from each school expressed some degree of difficulty adjusting to high school. Collectively, students reported difficulty finding their way around their new high school despite attempts made to help students learn the school layout. Students from School A thought they would have gained more knowledge about student culture and unspoken rules if school tours and orientations were conducted by upperclassmen rather than teachers. Students who moved to School B and C reported getting lost despite going on school tours and sitting through information sessions.

Staying Connected

For students, the first weeks of ninth-grade were characterized by a period of adjustment. Students from all three schools shared the belief that they were "the bottom class" and "little fishies in a pond." It appeared that district-level staff, along with school staff and faculty, understood the difficulties associated with entering high school and truly wanted to help their

students adjust and be successful in high school. As Mrs. Prado, the school district's small learning community director stated,

I think we definitely have to focus on the freshmen. There's no doubt. You've got to spend some extra time and effort with them. There's no doubt or we lose them. [Mrs. Prado, SDi-p11]

Faculty and staff from all three freshman academies highlighted in this study spoke to the importance of helping freshmen make the transition to high school. Faculty and staff believed their freshman academy helped with the transition through the creation and implementation of a freshman transition course—Keystone. The intent of the course was to help students successfully adjust to high school and experience academic success by addressing the personal, social, emotional, and academic needs of incoming ninth graders. All three schools required every freshman to enroll in Keystone. Students in School A and B took Keystone during their first semester of high school; School C students could take Keystone in either the fall and spring semester. Students at School C expressed frustrations about Keystone, partly due to taking a transition course during the second half of their ninth-grade year.

Although the district provided all three schools with the same basic curriculum for the course, the school district encouraged each school to develop the course based on both student and school needs. School A's Keystone course appeared to focus heavily on socially supporting students, helping them develop the personal skills necessary to be successful in high school. School B's transition course focused strongly on time management, study skills, and helping students prepare for upcoming tests. School C's Keystone course seemed to adhere closest to the school district curriculum. Units included school ties, leadership and teamwork, discovering you, academic skills, goals and time management, career awareness, decision-making, communication, interpersonal skills, and Sean Covey's (1998), *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*.

Faculty and staff at School A and C appeared to use Keystone as the avenue to get students involved in extracurricular activities and electives. It was their belief that getting involved in school activities would help students make the transition and deepen their sense of belonging to their new school. During student focus group interviews, students from both of these schools made reference to getting involved in sports as a way to adjust to high school, get to know upperclassmen, and stay out of trouble.

Faculty, staff, and students from each school thought Keystone provided a safe, freshman-focused atmosphere where key issues relevant to students' lives could be explored. Administrators, teachers, small learning community coordinators, and some students believed Keystone contributed to an increase in students' comfort level and heightened sense of school and class pride. Some teachers believed that school support for students diminished after the completion of Keystone. Students from School A and B spoke fondly of Keystone but only School A's students expressed how much the course helped them personally adjust and develop a sense of belonging to their new school. School C students did not speak fondly of Keystone, especially those that had the course during the spring semester of their freshman year.

In addition to Keystone, teachers from both School B and C believed teaming afforded the opportunity to unite freshmen as a group and increase their sense of belonging to the school community. Faculty and staff reported that they initially thought student transition teams might help students perceive to be part of the school, the ninth-grade class, and a smaller, more intimate group of freshman students. Teachers and students from both school B and C reported that teaming fell short of developing the deep sense of school, class, and team identity they originally anticipated. Many teachers believed that students did not know they were a part of a small team and thought students were confused about the concept. When I asked students from

School B and C about their teams, neither group of students knew they were part of a small team. Teachers from both schools believed that more team-related activities were necessary to help unite students.

Summary

This study appears to confirm the application of Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory to the middle to high school transition into freshman academies. Eccles and Midgley suggest that disruptions in adolescents' social networks during critical developmental periods may produce negative outcomes. Moving from middle to high school often means students are attending a much larger school. This transition can disturb social networks, reinforcing students' need to establish a sense of belonging to their new surroundings, a finding strongly supported in this study. Helping students make the transition to high school seemed to involve acclimating students to their new school environment and increasing their sense of belonging. All schools reported holding multiple activities during students' eighth-grade year and the summer prior to ninth-grade in an attempt to assist student in the adjusting to high school life. Of all the events offered prior to the first day of school, students reported school tours as the most necessary event. Once students started school, Keystone, the freshman transition course, reportedly helped a number of students acclimate themselves and establish a sense of belonging to their new school. Some students expressed that, to be most successful, the course should be taught immediately upon the transition into high school. Teaming reportedly fell short of helping all students establish a sense of belonging to their team, academy, and school.

Supportive and Collaborative Learning Environment

All three schools purposefully re-arranged their faculty, staff, and students into small learning communities, including freshman academies, in an attempt to create a more supportive

and collaborative learning environment. At each school site, the implementation of freshman academies reportedly improved student-centered talk. Faculty at Schools A and C noticed an increase in school-wide interdepartmental communication while teachers at School B reported an increase in a “family-like” teacher support network. Additionally, at all three schools the freshman academy included other student support programs that did not exist before the academy. These support programs appeared to be moderately effective in supporting the needs of ninth-graders.

Teacher to Teacher Communication

Establishment of small learning communities resulted in the placement of teachers of every discipline in a community/academy. Due to this organizational reconfiguration, educators in both School A and C expressed an increase in school-wide interdepartmental teacher-to-teacher communication. Increased teacher-to-teacher communication was perceived by faculty and staff at both schools to promote cohesiveness among faculty members and a change in school climate. Although teachers involved in School B’s freshman academy were arranged similar to teachers in School A’s freshman academy, there was no mention of an increase in whole-school teacher-to-teacher communication at school B.

Teacher Support Network

Teachers at School B reported that teaming and common planning helped to create an interdisciplinary teacher support network or “family atmosphere” within their freshman academy. Teachers spoke of many benefits to having a teacher support network, including the opportunity to get together to talk about students they had in common, elicit advice, and carry on professional discussions. Ultimately, teachers at School B believed the professional support network helped increase their confidence as a professional educator.

Student-Centered Talk

Interdisciplinary teaming, especially common team planning, was noted to increase collaboration and support. Because of teaming and common planning, teachers from each school reported having opportunities to meet as a group, communicate about students, and develop strategies for helping individual students. Increased opportunities for student-centered talk as a result of teaming and sharing a common planning period were thought to benefit both teachers and students. Teachers mentioned that by having opportunities to discuss students, they began to realize that their colleagues shared similar issues, concerns, and struggles. As a result, the sense of isolation that is often a part of teachers' everyday life reportedly began to dwindle.

At School B, proximity to teammates reportedly increased team collaboration and efforts to support students. Due to proximity, many teachers mentioned how convenient it was to communicate with fellow team teachers and monitor students throughout the school day. School A and C did not implement proximity. School A is in the process of planning to rearrange teacher teams so that their classrooms are closer together.

Faculty and staff from all three schools believed students also benefited from increased student-centered talk. They stated that discussing students helped detect at-risk students who otherwise might go unnoticed in a more departmentalized school environment. As a result, teachers reported being able to set up academic and behavioral interventions for individual students.

Educators at all three schools spoke of conducting interventions with students, often including parents and additional school support personnel. Faculty and staff at School B and C implemented a formalized intervention and accountability system for helping students. No student involved in the present study reported having a formal or informal intervention with his/her teachers.

By meeting and talking about individual students, school personnel from all three schools thought that students understood they were cared for and supported. Teachers shared stories of times when students were questioned by multiple teachers about their grades, conduct, and other school-related issues. However, not one student from any of the three schools mentioned an increase in care and support as a result of their teachers meeting as a team to talk about their needs.

Student Support Programs

Student support programs, such as advisory and peer mentors, were implemented with the intent to add another layer of support for all ninth graders. Both School A and C implemented some form of advisory as a way to support student needs. Although School A did not officially implement a formal advisory program, Keystone teachers took it upon themselves to act as advisors during both their Keystone class and on their own time. School C utilized homeroom, also known as “Cougar time,” to conduct advisory-like activities but teacher resistance reportedly dramatically limited its effect. Additionally, School A attempted to institute a peer mentor program whereby upperclassmen mentored freshman students. This attempt slowly collapsed during the fall semester.

Summary

This study appears to support the extension of Eccles and Midgley’s (1989) stage-environment fit theory to the middle to high school transition into freshman academies. Eccles and Midgley found that positive relationships between faculty and students are necessary to help students adjust and be successful in their new school, a finding supported by the data reported in my study. Teaming and common planning appeared to help teachers and students create a supportive and collaborative learning environment. Teachers spoke of being able to communicate with and help each other, alleviating the sense of isolationism. Freshman students

needing extra support were more likely to be recognized and helped by a team of professionals on an individualized basis. Teachers believed students experienced an increase in care as a result of increased student-centered talk; however, students involved in the present study made no reference to believing their teachers talked about or cared about them. Advisory and peer mentoring were intended to provide an additional level of support for ninth-grade students although not all programs proved to be effective or long-lasting.

Freshman-Focused Teaching and Learning

Freshman academies are thought to help personalize the teaching and learning process by focusing on the needs of incoming freshmen. In an effort to personalize the teaching and learning process, each school represented in the present study offered a freshman seminar course, reported sharing common instructional strategies, and, to some degree, attempted cross-curricular types of activities. However, most teachers did not report a belief that their freshman academy really affected the teaching and learning process.

Freshman Transition Course

The most noted benefit of the freshman academy to teaching and learning was the implementation of a freshman transition course—Keystone. All three schools offered Keystone to every freshman at some point during his/her ninth-grade year. School A and B offered the course to all students during the fall semester while School C offered it during both the fall and spring semesters.

The intent of Keystone was to help freshmen learn personal, career, and school development skills in a supportive and structured environment. Each school reported modifying the Keystone curriculum created by the school district to fit their unique needs. School A utilized Sean Covey's (1998) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* as the curriculum for their course. Faculty and staff at School A reported using Keystone as an opportunity to not only work

freshmen on personal, career, and school development skills, but also school and class spirit and to communicate the importance of FCAT. Faculty and staff at School C mentioned using the Keystone course curriculum guide and lesson plans produced by the school district in addition to Sean Covey's book. School personnel from School B spoke of modifying the district curriculum and using segments of both Sean Covey's book and the curriculum guide. During numerous conversations with school faculty and staff, they mentioned using Keystone to focus intensively on study skills and test preparation. All three schools reported requiring students to create a portfolio of student work with the intent that the portfolio would become part of their career academy portfolios.

Students from School A and B alluded to the benefits of taking Keystone. During the student focus group interview, School A's freshmen talked about how Keystone helped them to "synergize," "sharpen the saw," and think "win-win." They also mentioned learning good study and note taking skills. School B's students noted how the course helped them learn how to focus, take notes, and study. School C's students did not speak fondly about their freshman transition class, referring to the course as "a space filler" and the material as "common sense." All three administrators expressed the need for such a course and are planning to offer the course in upcoming school years. School B's principal expressed that he is not planning on offering the course to all freshmen. The majority of freshman academy teachers that participated in the present study expressed support for the value of the course and some thought the course needed to be "less fluffy" and more rigorous.

Continuity Between Classes

Teaming and common planning were cited as factors that contributed to an increase in continuity between freshman transition classes. Because of student-teacher teams and common planning, teachers acknowledged being able to share common instructional strategies, discuss

different strategies for teaching and reaching individual students, reinforce information learned in other classes, and work on creating cross-curricular lessons. Mrs. Prado, the school district's small learning community director, also spoke of her support for cross-curricular teacher collaboration.

So it's just getting teachers to understand and talk across the curriculum and we all know that that's how the brain learns. The brain does not learn in isolation and so when you have these kids over here that are in math class that are having a very difficult time over here doing circumference and angles but that teacher is working with the construction teacher who's teaching all that same stuff over here, then the learning is real. [Mrs. Prado, SDi-p2]

Teachers from every school pointed out benefits they perceived teaming and common planning had on teaching and learning. Most noteworthy was the ability to share common instructional strategies and reinforce information learned in other team classes. School B's teacher teams used their common planning period to share teaching strategies and to determine which skills they wanted to teach and reinforce in their classrooms. Teachers at School A mentioned focusing on common teaching strategies such as reading and note taking strategies. Teachers at School C expressed trying to be consistent in their teaching practices in an effort to help students develop a sense of group identity and be successful.

Educators in all three schools mentioned correlating instruction and implementing cross-curricular lessons. Although teachers expressed an interest in cross-curricular integration, they also spoke of factors that contributed to its limited use and perceived effectiveness. Factors such as time, understanding of how to create cross-curricular lessons, purity of teams, and block scheduling were all noted as hindering the extent cross-curricular lessons were implemented.

Students Helping Students

Students from School B spoke of collaborating with fellow classmates who shared multiple classes together. They mentioned helping each other with homework and class work, and

reminding one another of upcoming assignments. Students at School A and C did not speak of an increase in student-to-student collaboration as a result of teaming.

Celebrating Success

All three schools reported implementing incentive-based programs intended to encourage academic success, positive behavior, and good attendance. School A's nine-week and end-of-the-year incentives, School B's "Eagle Mall," and School C's "Raising the Bar" program were designed to highlight positive academic and behavioral growth. Most incentives were initially designed for freshmen, but were then expanded school-wide due to their success.

Academic Support Programs

In an effort to assist those freshmen needing extra academic help, each school incorporated academic support programs into their freshman academy. School A implemented variable learning time (VLT) for Algebra I to help increase the number of freshmen that pass Algebra I their ninth-grade year. School B started an after-school credit recovery program for freshmen needing to make up a failed course. This program, although initially for freshmen, has now become a school-wide program. School C organized its weekly schedule to include two, 45-minute periods of time that were devoted to student needs. Among other things, "Cougar Time" allowed students the opportunity to get extra academic assistance by attending peer tutoring. All three academic support programs appeared to produce noteworthy results.

Summary

Results from my study suggest that Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory can be applied to the middle to high school transition into freshman academies. Eccles and Midgley theory suggests that a developmentally appropriate learning environment must offer a student-focused integrated curriculum, a finding which my study appears to confirm. The freshman academy seemed to have limited influence on teaching practices. With the exceptions

of sparsely implemented cross-curricular activities, sharing of teaching methods, and reinforcing information learned in other classes, teachers from all three schools reported little change in their teaching methods. Regarding student learning, with the exception of limited extension of the skills learned in Keystone and noted increases in student-to-student collaboration, the freshman academy appeared to do little to affect student the way students learned in classes. Students were left to transfer skills learned in Keystone on their own. Academic-support programs reportedly produced solid results and will continue to be offered.

Culture of Commitment to Ninth-Grade Success

Creating a school culture committed to ninth-grade success might help students successfully make the transition to high school. In all three schools, establishing a culture of commitment meant getting thorough buy-in and support, selecting the right teachers for the freshman academy, and providing opportunities for staff development. One or more schools also mentioned time and funding issues associated with the small learning grant and dealing with outside influences as important factors to creating a freshman-focused culture. As Mrs. Prado, the school district's current small learning community district coordinator stated,

You can mandate it [small learning community school reform], but it won't happen. You have to change the culture and so do I think you have to get there? Yes. Do I think it's a process? Oh, most definitely. Is it painful? Some days it's really painful. [Mrs. Prado, SDi-p5]

Reculturing reportedly was imperative to the effectiveness of this school district's small learning community and freshman academy programs.

Complete Buy-in and Support

The district-level director, as well as school personnel from each school highlighted in the present study, mentioned complete buy-in and support as being absolutely essential but often difficult to attain. Administrators and teachers were reported as being major stakeholders in the

effectiveness of each school's freshman academy. In addition, School A also believed student support played a vital role in the success of their freshman academy.

Based on a conversation with Mrs. Prado, the school district's small learning community director, it appeared that the school district supported small learning communities, especially their freshman-focused initiatives. As Mrs. Prado stated, "The superintendent one hundred percent supports small learning communities" [Mrs. Prado, SDi-p5]. For the 2006-2007 school year, the school district applied for another federally funded small learning community grant to create small learning communities in six additional high schools within the district; however, the district was unable to secure the federal grant funding. Mrs. Prado mentioned that, as of May 2007, the district is in the process of applying for another grant to create more small learning communities in their largest, most at-risk high schools. Although it appeared, therefore, that the school district supported their small learning communities, administrators and teachers at all three schools made no reference to school district support. One small learning community coordinator did believe that the district supported freshman initiatives but expressed that the district seemed resistant to upperclassmen academy initiatives.

Many participants reported that administrative support was essential. Both the district director and teachers from all three schools mentioned the importance of supportive site-based administration.

Well, first and foremost your administration has to support it. Okay. Small learning communities is a grassroots movement but if it isn't supported at the top, it can't happen because it does take your guidance counselors, your administration buying into change, and change is difficult but it's the right change. I think sometimes when schools pull out of it, it's their philosophy. It really boils down to philosophy. [Mrs. Prado, Sdi-p2]

All three schools experienced changes in leadership during the fourth year of the grant. Teachers from both School C and B believed a lack of new administrative support hindered their programs. Teachers at School C reported that the change in principal hurt the headway they were

making with implementing their communities and freshman-focused initiatives. School C's principal expressed his commitment to freshman and sophomore initiatives but did not believe similar initiatives for juniors and seniors were necessary. Teachers from School B thought their administration perceived the freshman academy as a big "headache." School B's principal openly admitted that he did not completely buy-into the small learning community and freshman academy concept at first; however, over time, became a supporter of the freshman academy for select ninth graders. School A's teachers reported strong support from their leadership, old and new. Administrators from School A expressed completely supporting their freshman academy and all its initiatives.

In addition to administrative support, it was also perceived that teacher buy-in and support for the freshman academy was essential. Educators at all three schools spoke of the challenges associated with eliciting teacher buy-in. Each school started their freshman academy by eliciting volunteers. School A continued to build teacher buy-in by "selling a product—freshmen." Educators there believed more teachers would support and want to be a part of their freshman academy once they saw that it was producing successful freshmen. This approach seemed to work, as many teachers expressed an interest in being a part of School A's freshman academy for the 2007-2008 school year. Educators in School B believed that teacher buy-in and support increased as teachers saw that the school grade improved and many students were becoming more successful. School C referred to their faculty members in terms such as "cheerleader," "on the border," or "rock," indicating the level of buy-in on the part of those teachers. Faculty and staff reported leaving the "rocks" alone and focused their attention on their "on the border" teachers. Veteran teachers from both School B and C mentioned that they have seen many reform initiatives, like small learning communities, come and go. Teachers believed that the "this

too shall pass mindset” contributed to increased teacher resistance and lack of teacher buy-in. Additionally, educators at School C spoke of the importance of gaining the support of teacher-leaders (department heads and community leaders) and School A spoke of the importance of all academic departments buying into the concept. Additional factors such as the discontinuation of the grant and lack of administrative support also appeared to dampen teacher support for freshman academy initiatives.

Faculty and staff at School A mentioned the importance of soliciting student buy-in and support. School A believed both freshman and upperclassman support for the freshman academy was important. The principal believed that students must understand that this is their school and any program required their complete support to be effective.

Selecting the Right Personnel

Administrators, teachers, and students from all three schools mentioned the importance of selecting the right freshman academy personnel, especially those who taught Keystone. Based on input from the faculty and administration at each school, freshman academy personnel need to be passionate, caring, sincere, patient, flexible, solid disciplinarians, team players, and enjoy working with younger adolescents. All three schools initially staffed their freshman academies through volunteers. School A mentioned the importance of recruiting more teachers by promoting both freshman students and the program. Especially important to School A was the selection of appropriate Keystone teachers and having an exemplary freshman lead teacher. Students at School A thought their freshman academy teacher’s classroom management style and attitude were important. School B mentioned recruiting “the best” teachers at School B to join their freshman academy. School B reportedly was able to get these teachers to join the freshman academy by convincing them of its benefits. School C also recruited freshman teachers by asking for volunteers. Both teachers and students at School C believed a better method of selecting

ninth-grade teachers was needed. School A and C also found that arrangement of teacher teams was important. They found it important to pay particular attention to both the teacher's personality and willingness to be a team player.

Professional Development

Both the school district and individual schools offered professional development opportunities. One of the benefits of the small learning community grant was to provide professional development to district-level personnel as well as site-based faculty and staff.

You can't make change without staff development...I think our district does an outstanding job on training administrators in those components but not your department heads. So the SLC grant provided that staff development for total faculty, small groups within the faculty and how's everybody feel a piece of this puzzle and that was very important. [Mrs. Prado, Sdi-p6]

School leaders and teachers unanimously agreed that additional staff development opportunities were needed. Keystone appeared to be one area where additional professional development was necessary. Some teachers at School A did not believe they were adequately trained to teach Keystone. Administrators and teachers at School B believed more training for both Keystone and cross-curriculum integration was needed.

Small Learning Community Grant

The nature of the small learning community grant posed some issues that each school had to address. Both time and funding became an issue that affected how each school implemented various freshman academy initiatives. School C's faculty spoke candidly about the issues associated with the federal small learning community grant. Since the school district received an implementation grant, not a planning grant, there was little to no allocated planning time prior to implementing each school's freshman academy. Furthermore, since the original grant was for three years, all structures and programs had to be in operation and producing results by the third

year. Mrs. Prado, the school district's small learning director, spoke to the issues associated with the three-year implementation grant.

A lot of it is some people wanted to see faster results. The first SLC grants of which we were a part of was a three year grant. Those grants are now five year grants because change cannot happen really in three years. [Mrs. Prado, SDi-p5]

Each school in the present study did receive an additional year to continue adding to their small learning community structures. The grant was in place from the 2003-2004 school year until its expiration at the end of the 2006-2007 school year.

School A and B both expressed concerns about funding. With the federal grant coming to a close, both schools were concerned about the vitality of current ninth-grade initiatives. Because the grant covered most of the freshman academy expenses (e.g., lead teachers, small learning community coordinators, and incentive-based activities) teachers at both schools were uncertain what would happen once the grant expired. Teachers at School B were convinced that their freshman academy would no longer exist once the grant funding ended. School A expressed additional funding concerns, as it was their intent to improve upon and expand their current program but did not have the necessary funds in place by the end of the grant.

Outside Influences

Each school encountered outside influences that reportedly could affect the future of their small learning community and freshman academy. School C's principal and teachers discussed such influences as the school district's new school and teacher schedule and Florida's class size reduction amendment. Mrs. Prado, the school district's small learning community director, spoke of the repercussions the new district schedule and class size reduction amendment might have for freshman academies.

I heard at the APC meeting yesterday was there are some schools now that have always done the keystone class that are no longer able to do the keystone class because we're back to the thing we began with units, six out of seven, class size reduction and that's not a class

size reduction unit, so schools that have done it for three and four years now are now pulling away from it. [Mrs. Prado, Sdi-p7]

These influences are projected to make it extremely difficult to schedule pure student-teacher teams, give teachers common planning, and provide teachers with enough time for collaboration while staying within the parameters of the amendment and operate on an eight-period day.

Summary

Establishing a culture of commitment appears to confirm the application of Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory to the middle to high school transition into the freshman academy school reform effort. Reculturing a school to focus on ninth-grade success appeared to be related to complete buy-in and support, selection of the right teachers, extensive staff development, additional avenues for funding, more time than the grant allowed, and proactively planning to combat outside influences. First, it is thought that administration, ninth-grade teachers, and students must buy into and support the freshman academy initiatives. Reportedly, this was not the case in these three schools as educators in each school expressed some form of resistance. Second, many expressed the opinion that freshman academy teachers must be hand-picked. Although all three schools elicited volunteers, they also spoke of the need to be even more selective. Third, staff development was perceived to be essential. Although staff development was offered, all three schools called for additional staff development opportunities. Fourth, additional funding, although not completely secured in each school, was considered to be necessary. Schools reported needing additional funding to take the place of the expiring small learning community grant. Fifth, both district and site-based personnel believed the small learning community grant needed to be longer than three years. Although a fourth year was awarded, schools still reported needing more time to implement all freshman initiatives. Sixth, outside influences also posed concerns for the future of freshman academy initiatives. Teachers,

administrators, and the district-level director believed that both the school district's new schedule and the state of Florida's class size reduction amendment will negatively affect the future of small learning community and freshman academy initiatives.

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Overview

Nationwide, the middle to high school transition is negatively affecting many students, resulting in poor academic performance, disengagement from school, poor attendance, and dropping out of school. Freshman academies, part of the larger small learning community school reform movement, aim to create smaller, more personalized learning environments that socially, emotionally, and academically support freshman students. The purpose of the present study was to apply the stage-environment fit theory to the investigation of how freshman academies might help students make successful transitions to high school. Stage-environment fit theory deals with the nature of the transition from one school to another. According to Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory, secondary school environments must match the developmental needs of adolescents otherwise negative outcomes will result. Although this study did not directly test Eccles and Midgley's stage-environment fit theory, the findings from my study are directly related to stage-environment fit theory. It appears that the small learning community secondary school reform effort, especially the freshman academy, attempt to create a developmentally appropriate learning environment for entering ninth graders but such reform efforts may only be truly beneficial when completely and effectively implemented.

In this study, I used a constructivist approach in an attempt to apply Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory to explore how freshman academies might help students make the transition to high school. One Florida school district that represented the state student population was selected to be part of the present study. All schools with active freshman academies created under the same 2002 federal implementation grant were asked to participate. Three out of four schools agreed to be part of the study. A total of 67 participants participated in

this study. I observed a total of 22 classrooms, conducted 12 individual interviews, held 13 focus group interviews, and collected archival evidence from each school site. The data were analyzed using Hatch's inductive analysis method. Inductive analysis focuses on starting with specific pieces of data, finding patterns among the pieces, and moving to a more generalized statement regarding the data. Data were organized into a list of discrete domains based on patterns across the cases. Both member checks and peer reviews were used to increase the credibility of the findings.

The cases described in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 reveal a detailed, contextualized picture of three schools' attempts to implement freshman academies. Chapter 7 compares and contrasts the findings from all three cases. The present chapter explores the relations between current literature and this study's research findings based on the central question. The central research question for this study was,

How might freshman academies help students make the transition to high school in ways that are developmentally appropriate?

Questions that helped address the central research question included:

- Does the stage-environment fit theory offer insight into the problems and solutions surrounding the transition from middle school to high school?
- What is the nature of the freshman academy?
- To what extent does the organization of the freshman academy help foster a developmentally appropriate learning environment?
- What transition elements do freshman academies implement?
- How do the perceptions of administrators and teachers influence the implementation of the freshman academy?
- How do students perceive their freshman academy experience?
- To what extent has the district been able to effectively implement small learning communities at the high school level?

The remaining portions of this chapter elaborate on how the present study attempted to apply Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory to the middle to high school transition in an effort to investigate how freshman academies might help students make the transition to high school. First, the extension of Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory to the middle-to-high school transition is discussed. Second, because it made more conceptual sense to organize the remaining portions of this chapter around the four domains that emerged across the cases, each domain is revisited linking findings to both current literature and stage-environment fit theory. The central and guiding questions are addressed either separately or together within the four domains. Lastly, implications for future research and practice are discussed.

Extending the Stage-Environment Fit Theory

Often large schools create impersonal, developmentally inappropriate environments (Cotton, 2001; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Such school environments typically highlight departmentalization, teacher-centered pedagogy, competition, and strict student control which can pose problems for incoming students (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1991). Eccles and her colleagues further believe that such environments disrupt students' social networks and reduce opportunities for positive adult relationships. All of these factors, interacting with the natural adolescent developmental changes that occur during this period, result in a developmental mismatch between students' school environment and their individual needs. Eccles & Midgley (1989) found that declines in student motivation were not a result of their developmental changes, but were a result of a mismatch between their needs and their school environment. Schools that support adolescent developmental needs reportedly help students make the transition to their new school (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1991). Simply

stated, Eccles and her colleagues suggest that the nature of the educational environment students enter is more important than the timing of the transition.

Schools highlighted in the present study attempted to support students' needs through the implementation of various freshman academy initiatives which, according to the stage-environment fit theory, are designed to create a developmentally supportive educational environment. Such initiatives included student-teacher interdisciplinary teams, a freshman transition class, transition activities, proximity, academic and behavioral incentive-based activities, academic and social support programs, cross-curricular lessons, and student interventions. A culture of commitment to ninth-grade success, including complete buy-in and support, selecting the right teachers, offering professional development, understanding the grant, and handling outside influences influenced the effective implementation of the abovementioned initiatives. Such initiatives, *when implemented completely*, were noted to help students make the transition to high school. This finding is consistent with school transition literature (Cushman, 2006; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999; Mac Iver, 1990; Mizelle, 1999, 2005; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Queen, 2002), small learning community literature (Cotton, 2001, Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007; USDOE, 2001), and the stage-environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgely, 1989). Students, teachers, and administrators reported that freshman academy initiatives need to be completely and effectively implemented in order to best help students adjust to high school life. The initiatives that appear to be most completely implemented include each school's transition program, Keystone class, and incentive-based activities. Initiatives perceived as being partially operational include teaming, student-focused curriculum, cross-curricular lessons, academic and social support programs, student interventions, proximity, advisory, and

mentoring. Out of all the partially implemented initiatives, pure freshman transition teams was reported as the most important element missing from each school's freshman academy.

Interdisciplinary teaching teams are noted as being the "hallmark" of the success of freshman academies, requiring a major change in the organization and curriculum typically found in traditional high schools (Kerr, 2002; SREB, 2002). According to Jay Hertzog (as cited in Chmelynski, 2004), ninth-grade academies are more effective when a group of teachers dedicated to freshman work together as a group. Each school highlighted in the present study had freshman interdisciplinary teams that met approximately every other week to plan and collaborate. Teachers in the present study reported many positive benefits that resulted from working together as a group. Such benefits included better communication and support, increased focus on individual student needs, the implementation of similar instructional methods, and the creation of cross-curricular lessons. Despite such positive results, teachers expressed the belief that purity limited the effectiveness and benefits teaming could offer; however, purity alone might not be the reason why teaming was not perceived as completely effective.

Literature on teaming within freshman academies suggests that teams meet frequently, at least once a week, in order to gain the most benefit out of the teaming structure (Fields, 2005). However, teachers in this study reported meeting as a team every other week. Proximity is also noted to help create a collaborative and effective team, yet only one school attempted to implement proximity. Lastly, but possibly most important, when students were asked to describe their community and freshman team, they were unable to elaborate about either in any detail. Interdisciplinary teaming was designed to help the transition, but students did not even know they were on a team. As a result, teachers thought teaming would help students connect to their new school but students did not even realize they were on a team. This finding seems to suggest

a substantial disconnect between how school personnel viewed teaming and how students experienced it.

The present study suggests that the freshman academy consists of various developmentally appropriate initiatives intended to personalize the learning environment, initiatives that must be fully implemented in order for students to truly benefit from such a program. The findings from the present study, when applied to Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory, suggest that freshman academies may create a more developmentally appropriate environment for incoming ninth-graders when all initiatives are completely implemented. Eccles and Midgley believed it was the nature or context of the school organization in which the transition occurred that might make the transition destructive (Eccles and Midgley, 1989; Eccles, et al., 1991). When the stage-environment fit theory is applied to the middle-to-high-school transition into a freshman academy, one would expect that a fully implemented freshman academy program would help create a more developmentally appropriate learning environment meeting the needs of young adolescents and easing the transition process. Partially implemented programs run the risk of not completely meeting all the developmental needs of entering ninth graders. This might create a developmental mismatch between the needs of young adolescents and their new learning environment. All three schools in the present study can be classified as having partially implemented freshman academies that might not have met all the developmental needs of their freshman student body.

Extending Existing Literature

Using a constructivist approach, the present study attempted to apply the stage-environment fit theory in an attempt to illuminate how freshman academies might help students make the transition to high school in developmentally appropriate ways. Findings from this study are intended to extend the literature on the middle-to-high-school transition, developmentally

appropriate schooling, and the small learning community reform movement by including specific, contextual examples that reiterate the importance of personalizing the high school experience. Small learning communities, including freshman academies/houses, attempt to help students make the transition from middle school to high school by personalizing the high school experience in an effort to help students make the transition to high school (Cotton, 2001; CSRQC, 2005; Dejong & Locker, 2006; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Kerr, 2002; Kerr & Legters, 2004; Letgers & Kerr, 2001; Sammon, 2007; SREB, 2002; USDOE, 2001). Teaming, proximity, transition programs and activities, student-centered curriculum, freshman transition course, advisory, student incentives, and student academic and social support programs are all components to freshman academies that help personalize the high school experience and ease the adjustment to high school. Each of the domains that emerged across all three cases reinforced the importance of personalizing the learning environment to match the developmental needs of incoming ninth graders. Such findings suggest that Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory can be extended to include the middle-to-high-school transition into freshman academies.

Sense of Belonging to School Community

Moving from a smaller, more personalized middle school to a larger high school can be overwhelming for many students, raising many concerns and generating much excitement (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cushman, 2006; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999; Letgers & Kerr, 2001; Mizelle, 1999, 2005; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2001; Queen, 2002; SREB, 2002). Adjusting to a new school requires students to build connections to their new school, faculty, staff, and peers. When students connect to their new learning environment, it is thought that student motivation, engagement, and sense of belonging increase (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgley et al. 1993; NRCIM, 2004; Osterman, 2000). The need for high

school students to establish a sense of belonging to their educational setting is well documented in the literature (Cotton, 2001; Cushman, 2006; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; NRCIM, 2004; Osterman, 2000; Sammon, 2007). Students' sense of belonging is increased when schools focus on student confidence, offer rigorous yet supportive instructional opportunities, hold high expectations, allow for student decision-making, and help students develop relationships (Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; NRCIM, 2004; SREB 2002). Both small schools and large schools that implement components of small learning communities are thought to help increase students' sense of belonging and affiliation (Cotton, 1996).

Helping students establish a sense of belonging to their new school begins with building working relationships with their feeder middle school(s) and incorporating numerous activities before, during, and after the transition to high school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1997, 1998, 1999; Queen, 2002). Such transition activities should focus on helping students reduce anxiety and feel more comfortable in their new school community (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999). All three schools' freshman academies implemented transition programs and activities intended to help alleviate students' apprehension and increase their sense of belonging.

Transition Program

Establishing an effective transition program involves establishing a transition team made up of teachers, administrators, parents, and students from both sending and receiving schools (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999; Letrello & Miles, 2003; Queen, 2002). This team plans transition activities and focuses on vertical collaboration. Although administrators and their leadership teams did collaborate with their feeder middle schools, not one school established a transition team that included all the above-mentioned stakeholders. School B reported having difficulty developing a working relationship with one of its feeder middle schools and School C only created a relationship with its major feeder middle school. School A reported having a new,

yet solid working relationship with their feeder middle school from which numerous transition activities were crafted.

In an effort to increase students' sense of comfort and belonging, schools in this study instituted numerous transition activities before and during the transition. Such activities involved school personnel from the middle and high school, high school upperclassmen, eighth-grade students, and parents. Noted as a popular transition practice, eighth-grade students moving into Schools A and B took fieldtrips to visit their soon-to-be high school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1997; Kerr, 2002; Mizelle, 1999, 2005). Hertzog & Morgan (1999) found that although fieldtrips give students opportunities to visit their new school, this transition activity alone may not be enough to help students make a successful move to high school. Another popular practice, upperclassmen from Schools A and B went to the middle school to talk with eighth graders (Hertzog & Morgan, 1997; Kerr, 2002; MacIver, 1990). Personnel from all three schools also visited their feeder schools during the spring prior to the transition to establish relationships with students, communicate details about their school, build enthusiasm, and answer questions.

Freshman-focused special events like summer camp (Schools A, B, and C), parent night (School A), freshman orientation (School C), and open houses (School B) are noted in transition literature as best practices (Hertzog & Morgan, 1997, 1998, 1999; Mizelle, 1999, 2005; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Queen, 2002). Hertzog and Morgan suggest that such activities where information about curriculum, clubs, and academics are disseminated are used by schools throughout the country to help smooth the transition to high school.

The abovementioned transition activities and programs (e.g. school tours/fieldtrips, orientations, camps) are thought to help with the procedural aspect of making the transition to a new school (Akos & Galassi, 1994). Akos and Galassi's study found that before entering high

school, students wanted more information and insight, better tours, and the opportunity to talk with upperclassmen about high school life. Such findings were echoed by many students from all three schools in the present study. Students perceived that the transition to high school into their freshman academy would have been more informative, and possibly easier, if upperclassmen were more involved in the transition process.

For students, the first weeks of ninth grade are characterized as a major period of adjustment. Upon entering high school, students' social networks are often disrupted. Often, this disruption makes incoming ninth-grade students more susceptible to harmful peer influences (Queen, 2002; Schiller, 1999). Research alludes to the importance of offering incoming ninth graders opportunities to establish new, positive social networks and develop a sense of belonging to their new school (Hertzog & Morgan 1999; Mac Iver, 1990; Midgley, Eccles, & Feldlaufer, 1991; NRCIM, 2004). Students from all three schools expressed being "the bottom class" and "little fishies in a pond." To some degree, students from all three schools alluded to the difficulties associated with going from "the seniors" of their middle school to "the bottom class" of their new high school where they did not believe many people recognized or noticed them (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; Queen, 2002). They spoke of common transitional issues such as getting lost, not knowing the social code, and just wanting to fit in. In order to continue to help students adjust to their new school life and develop a sense of belonging, it is imperative to offer additional activities and programs throughout the first weeks of school (Akos & Galassi, 1994; Hertzog & Morgan, 1997, 1998, 1999; Mac Iver, 1990; SREB, 2002). All three schools highlighted in the present study offered additional support programs and activities throughout the first weeks of school.

Transition Course

Transition courses are proving to be of tremendous importance for alleviating the issues associated with moving into and adjusting to high school (Kemple & Herlihy, 2004; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; SREB, 2002). As a result, many schools are implementing a freshman transition course to serve as a support program for incoming ninth graders. For example, South Grand Prairie High School (SGPHS) in Grand Prairie, Texas, implemented what they call *Keystone*. This course provided students the opportunity to openly discuss the transition and gain the understanding necessary to handle this turning point. Because of this program, academic success and attendance rates dramatically increased at SGPHS (SREB, 2002). All three schools in the present study implemented their own version of Keystone, a freshman transition course, reporting similar academic and attendance results as SGPHS.

Freshman transition courses are designed to help acclimate students to high school life and experience academic success by addressing their personal, social, emotional, and academic needs (Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Kemple & Herlihy, 2004; SREB, 2002). In all three schools, each Keystone course was heterogeneously grouped, giving students an opportunity to meet new students and develop new social networks. Heterogeneous grouping coupled with the socially supportive nature of the curriculum is noted as a developmentally appropriate practice for increased adolescent learning (Eccles, 1989; George & Alexander, 2003; George, McEwin, & Jenkins, 2000; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004). Furthermore, Cotton (2001) found that exemplary small learning communities that personalized the high school learning experience for students implemented heterogeneous, non-tracked classes. Students from School C perceived such heterogeneity as counterproductive to their ability to learn whereas students from Schools A and B made no reference in favor of or against the heterogeneous grouping.

Keystone appeared to also help students in Schools A and C develop a sense of belonging and establish new social networks through exposure to extracurricular and elective-based opportunities. According to Cotton (2001), students that are known and cared for understand their participation in school-related events is important and wanted. As a result, extracurricular participation tends to be greater in small schools, including large schools with small learning communities. Letrello & Miles (2003) found that ninth-grade students who were involved in extracurricular activities reported an easier time adjusting to their new school. In the present study, Schools A and C used Keystone as a way to help students learn about and get involved in extracurricular activities and electives. Students from both schools spoke to the importance of getting actively involved. Many used sports as a way to adjust to high school, get to know upperclassmen, and stay out of trouble. These findings are consistent with Akos and Galassi's (1994) research that found students used extracurricular activities as a way to help them transition to high school and begin to establish a sense of belonging. Additionally, School A's Keystone course focused intensely on helping students develop a sense of belonging to their new school by encouraging school and class pride/spirit, a trait often lacking in entering ninth graders.

Faculty, staff, and some students from each school thought Keystone, a freshman academy initiative, provided a safe, freshman-focused environment where developmental issues relevant to students' lives could be explored. Most teachers spoke fondly of how Keystone socially supported students, helping to establish a strong sense of belonging. Students from Schools A and B spoke fondly of how Keystone helped them adjust to high school, whereas, students from School C reported learning very little from their Keystone class and did not believe it helped them adjust to high school. Because School C offered Keystone during both the fall and spring

semesters, the timing of when students took the transition course may have attributed to students' perceptions of its overall effectiveness.

Interdisciplinary Teaming

Academic teaming, also known as interdisciplinary teaming, is a practice often regarded as a developmentally appropriate way to organize teachers and students into smaller, more manageable groups. Teaming is noted to increase the possibility for a more personalized educational experience (George et al., 2000) and help to establish a sense of belonging and engagement (Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007). School personnel from Schools B and C initially thought teaming would help unite freshmen as a group and increase their sense of belonging to the school community. However, in retrospect, teachers and students from both Schools B and C admitted that teaming did not produce the increase in students' sense of school, class, and team identity that they anticipated. Faculty and staff from School A did not mention teaming as a freshman academy initiative that they thought contributed to an increase in students' sense of belonging. Furthermore, when I asked students from all three schools to describe their team, not one student knew he/she was on a team. It appears that the incomplete implementation of teaming might not have produced the benefits anticipated. Teachers attested to not doing enough to explain the teaming structure, its purpose, and benefits to their students. Despite teachers' interest in holding team meetings with all their students, teachers from all three schools reported never meeting with their students as a whole team. Time, support, and lack of purity were perceived to be major downfalls to the interdisciplinary teaming concept, ultimately contributing to its limited implementation and effectiveness. Purity is necessary for teachers concentrate on to student individual needs, cater instruction, and integrate curriculum (Sammon, 2007).

Supportive and Collaborative Learning Environment

Schools are most productive when they establish a supportive environment whereby teachers and students are motivated and personal relationships are developed (Cotton, 2001; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Fields, 2005; Sammon, 2007). Small learning communities, including freshman academies, are designed to create such an environment (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE 2004; Sammon, 2007). Febey (2006) found that small learning communities with high levels of collaboration and solid professional relationships were important factors in creating successful small communities.

Faculty from all three schools reported improvement in teacher communication and student-centered talk as a result of working within their school's freshman academy and being assigned to teams. School B also reported an increase in a "family-like" teacher support network. Additionally, as part of each school's freshman academy, additional student support programs were instituted in an attempt to address student needs.

Teaming Encouraged Teacher Communication and Support

The freshman academy organizational structure, specifically interdisciplinary teaming, reportedly allowed educators at Schools A and C the opportunity to communicate with teachers from various disciplines. As a result of the increase in school-wide communication, school personnel spoke of a change in school climate, moving from an isolated environment to a more friendly and cohesive climate. Although they did not express an increase in whole-school communication, educators at School B reported an increase in "family-like" support network within their academy and team. Findings from small school literature (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988) and small learning communities literature (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Potter, 2004; Sammon, 2007) confirm that schools that focus on increasing communication and creating professional relationships between teachers tend to have a more personalized school

environment. Teachers from small learning communities that truly personalize the learning experience for high school students report positive relationships with staff, share the belief that they belong to a professional community, and express an increased “quality of life” (Cotton, 2001).

Freshman Academy Initiatives Encouraged Student-Centered Talk

A personalized school environment is one where students believe their teachers know and care about them (Cotton, 2001). Lear (2001 as cited in Cotton, 2001) asserts that personalizing schooling, by developing a relationship with each student, is one of the most important benefits of small learning communities. Literature suggests that freshman academy initiatives such as teaming, common planning, proximity, and student-focused programs reportedly provided teachers with opportunities to get to know their students on a more personalized level and learn about their individual needs (Cotton, 2001; Cushman, 2006; Fields, 2005; George, et al., 2000; Kerr & Legters, 2004). School personnel from all three sites believed students and teachers both benefit from increased opportunities for student-centered talk. Faculty and staff from each school reported that student interventions emerged out of the increased understanding of student needs. They believed such initiatives increased student-centered talk and that the initiatives sent the message that teachers cared for and supported students. Teachers from each school reported numerous instances where, as a result of teaming and student interventions, students expressed the belief that they were cared for and supported. However, during the student focus group interview, not one student from any of the three schools directly mentioned an increase in care and support as a result of initiatives that were designed to increase student-centered talk. This data seems to suggest a substantial variance between how teachers and students perceive freshman academy initiatives designed to increase communication, support, care, and

personalization. Faculty at School B also believed proximity helped to increase student-centered talk, team collaboration, support, and student monitoring.

Upperclassmen Involvement

Current high school students also play an active role in the transition process. Through peer support programs, current students can befriend incoming students. Such programs as pen pal buddies, shadowing, big brother/big sister, and student mentoring may help students build friendships and learn about their new school (Cushman, 2006; Hertzog & Morgan, 1997, 1999; ICLE, 2004; Mac Iver, 1990). In an effort to support student needs, School A attempted to institute a peer mentor program, but it dissolved over the course of a semester. Peer mentor programs are noted in the transition literature as a great way to help students make the transition to high school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1997, 1998). Schools B and C did not report implementing any form of upperclassmen-lead social support program. Upperclassmen-led programs, noted as being beneficial to the transition process, were missing in each of the three schools highlighted in the present study.

Advisement Programs

Advisory allows teachers an opportunity to help students develop a sense of belonging to their new school (Sammon, 2007). Advisement programs support student developmental needs by focusing on the whole child—academically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually (Cushman, 2006; George et al., 2000; Hertzog & Morgan, 1997, 1999; Fields, 2005; Mac Iver, 1990). Such programs foster positive student-teacher and student-student relationships, reducing the anonymity often associated with entering high school. Kerr (2002) found that during the 1999-2000 school year, 33% of Maryland's high schools had some form of advisory program or homeroom. Although no school in the present study officially declared having a *formalized* advisory program, Schools A and C implemented an advisory-like program as part of their

freshman academy. School A implemented their advisor/advisee program through their Keystone class. Using transition classes as an advisory program is believed to be a beneficial way to help students with personal needs (SREB, 2002). School C's "Cougar Time" homeroom appeared to include qualities found in high school advisement programs. Sammon (2007) found that many schools are using the homeroom period as an advisory-like period. School B did not appear to have any form of organized advisory. Reportedly, the schools highlighted in this study made limited attempts to implement a formalized, advisory program considered to one of the foundational elements to a freshman academy (Fields, 2005; Sammon, 2000), middle to high school transition programs (Cushman, 2006; Hertzog & Morgan, 1997, 1999; Mac Iver, 1990) and developmentally appropriate schooling (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; George et al., 2000).

Freshman-Focused Teaching and Learning

Kerr (2002) found freshman academies/houses, necessitates a major change in the curriculum typically found in traditional high schools in order to truly engage students and improve the teaching and learning process. Recent research conducted by Degnan (2006) suggests that attention must be placed on the teaching and learning process in order to establish learning environments that truly engage students versus producing pupils that are intelligent, but disengaged. Freshman academies are noted to help engage and personalize the teaching and learning process by creating a smaller, student-focused learning environment where teachers utilize a variety of instructional methods to help cater instruction to the individual student (Cotton, 2001; Sammon, 2007; Wasley, et al., 2000).

Partly due to their small size, school personnel in freshman academies and other types of small learning communities reportedly are more likely to recognize and respond to students' individual needs than teachers and administrators in large schools (Cotton, 2001). Effective freshman-focused instruction is integrated, rigorous, and relevant. It includes the use of shared

instructional strategies by all teachers on a team, cross-curriculum integration, a variety of teaching strategies, and a strong focus on helping students adjustment to high school life (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007).

Teachers from all three schools reported using common instructional strategies, designing cross-curricular lessons, and creating opportunities to celebrate student success. Additionally, each school offered a freshman seminar course designed to help students make the transition to high school. Despite these changes, most teachers did not believe the implementation of freshman academy initiatives substantially affected their teaching practices or the ways students learned. Simply stated, teachers reported that their teaching practices did not change as a result of being part of a freshman transition team housed within a freshman academy. Faculty and staff reported that lack of purity as a limitation to the extent teachers could utilize similar teaching methods and create cross-curricular lessons. Sharing similar students was perceived to be necessary in order to reap the benefits out of sharing similar teaching techniques and creating cross-curricular lessons. As a result, teachers reported that they did not focus attention on teaching and learning because their team did not share all the same students.

In exemplary freshman academies, teaching and learning would be student-focused, integrated, and delivered using multiple methods. Teaching would become developmentally focused with students needs guiding the curriculum and instructional practices (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005). According to Kerr (2002), student-centered instructional practices were the most utilized school organization practice with Maryland's ninth-grade small learning communities during the 1999-2000 school year. Despite the implementation of similar freshman academy initiatives, none of the three schools in the present study reported such developmentally appropriate curricular and instructional changes. While I observed several teachers utilizing

student-centered teaching methods, these teachers reported that they used such student-focused teaching strategies prior to teaching within the freshman academy. Student-centered instruction is a weakness of many freshman academies (Potter, 2004). Mohr (2000) found that new small learning communities did not initially focus on classroom instruction and student learning; rather, they placed emphasis on maintaining the freshman academy structures. Each school's concentration on implementing and maintaining existing freshman academy initiatives could be one possible explanation for why they reported a lack of focus on teaching and learning. Additionally, the degree freshman academy structures were implemented could contribute to the lack of focus on teaching and learning.

Transition Course

Keystone, a freshman transition course, was noted by faculty and staff as the freshman academy initiative most beneficial to teaching and learning. Transition programs, like Keystone, that provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in high school and beyond are common in small learning communities with a ninth-grade focus (Kerr, 2002). Such freshman-focused programs are intended to personalize the learning environment and meet students' developmental needs (Fields, 2005) and are credited with changing the culture of high schools (SREB, 2002). Organizations such as The Talent Development High School and International Center for Leadership in Education both created an outline for a freshman transition seminar or Keystone course. Each school highlighted in the present study offered Keystone to every freshman at some point during their ninth-grade year. Most faculty, staff, and students believed such a course was beneficial for ninth-grade students; however, School C's students spoke of their dislike of the program.

Academic Programs and Incentives

Freshman academies offer extra-help programs, such as tutoring, that serve as student academic support structures (SREB, 2002). Cushman (2006) found that ninth-grade students want extra help with academics, specifically suggesting tutoring as one way to provide additional assistance. Additionally, academic and behavioral incentives such as recognition, awards, and luncheons are having a great effect on student self-confidence and academic success (SREB, 2002). Each school in the present study implemented both academic support programs and incentive-based activities geared toward helping students succeed in high school.

Culture of Commitment to Ninth-Grade Success

Creating small learning communities, including freshman academies, involves a change in school organization and culture reflective of the new school vision (Ancess, 1997; Nelson, 2006). Changing school culture can be extremely difficult, as many people want schools to produce better results but may be unwilling to do anything different to produce such results (Wasley & Lear, 2001). Recent research by Nelson (2006) suggests that school personnel, district, and community norms and expectations embedded into the school culture can cause tension and hinder, possibly stop, the institutional change necessary to reinvent a large high school. Commitment and support from all stakeholders, careful selection of ninth-grade teachers, staff development, understanding the small learning community grant, and dealing with outside influences proved to be important factors in the implementation and vitality of freshman academy initiatives and establishing a new school culture.

Supportive Personnel

Considered to be an important guiding principle to the formation of small learning communities, all school personnel must be committed to providing a safe, caring, and student-focused high school environment (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; ICLE, 2004; Sammon, 2007;

SREB, 2002). Creating small learning communities is time-consuming, requiring a deep level of commitment from all school personnel (Baldwin, 2006). In order to effectively implement small learning communities, leadership and teaching staff must be committed to the small learning community concept and held accountable for improving student learning (Febey, 2006; Mohr, 2000; Wasley, et al., 2000). Faculty and staff at each school expressed the importance of teachers, administrators, and staff members support of freshman academy initiatives. Many teachers attributed the lack of full implementation of freshman academy initiatives to both peer and administrator resistance and lack of support. Personnel from School A also perceived upperclassmen support as important. Perceptions of administrators and teachers influenced the implementation of the freshman academy as complete execution of freshman academy initiatives appeared to be directly influenced by the degree stakeholders bought-into and supported such initiatives.

Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative leadership where teachers, administrators, staff, and students all are involved in the decision-making process is considered to be a favorable small learning community practice (Cotton, 2001; ICLE, 2004; Potter, 2004). Each school highlighted in the present study utilized, to some degree, both teachers and support staff as leaders for their small learning communities. School A had a small learning community coordinator who was a former science teacher, along with a ninth-grade lead teacher who concurrently taught freshman social studies. School B employed two small learning coordinators, one of whom was a former administrator and the other a guidance counselor. Additionally, School B had a ninth-grade leader teacher who also taught freshman science classes. School C utilized teachers as community leaders for each community/house and, up until November of 2006, School C had a small learning coordinator that oversaw each of the small learning communities. Specifically for freshman, School C had a

freshman focus coordinator, ninth-grade lead teacher, and for the 2005-2006 school year, they had a freshman administrator. Through these positions, teachers and staff members were given the power and autonomy to make decisions. No school mentioned involving parents or students in any small learning community or ninth-grade academy decision-making processes. Currently, upperclassmen at all three schools appear to be moderately involved with helping incoming students make the transition to high school in ways that do not involve making decisions. Although each school had teachers and staff sharing leadership roles, school personnel spoke of the site-based administrators acting as gatekeepers who determine which initiatives were and were not implemented.

Selecting the Right Personnel

Noteworthy freshman academies have school personnel that are passionate about their freshman academy, committed to working with ninth-grade students, and expect their academy to be successful (Chmelynski, 2004; Cotton, 2001; SREB, 2002). It is important to select freshman academy teachers that understand, care about, and want to work with ninth graders. Exemplary small learning communities tend to elicit volunteers to teach in each community (Cotton, 2001; SREB, 2002). Each school highlighted in this study staffed their freshman academy, at least initially, with volunteers. School A and B reported “selling” the benefits of working in the freshman academy with ninth-grade students. Students also mentioned how important it was to carefully select who taught freshman classes. This finding suggests that the selection of freshman academy teachers must be thoughtful, meticulous, and made with students’ developmental interest at heart.

Professional Development

Freshman academy personnel must place an intense focus on professional development (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; Mayhan & Edmunds, nd; SREB, 2002). Sammon (2007) suggests

that school implementing small learning communities need professional development opportunities that are “mission-specific” (p. 20). School personnel from each school alluded to professional development opportunities afforded them by both the school district and individual school, but believed more staff development was necessary. In an effort to help effectively implement small learning communities at the high school level, throughout all four years of the grant the school district reportedly offered numerous professional development opportunities. Wasley and Lear (2001) report that exemplary small learning communities design their own ongoing professional development opportunities catering to site-based needs. Although all three schools reportedly offered site-based development, teachers expressed the desire to have a more site-based staff development where their teacher team could collaborate and directly apply what they were learning to their team and freshman academy. Keystone and cross-curriculum design were two areas where additional professional development was reportedly necessary.

Understanding the Small Learning Community Grant

All three schools in the present study also attested to the importance of understanding the purpose and parameters of the federal small learning community implementation grant. Implementation of whole-school reform efforts such as small learning communities takes time. Kerr & Legters (2004) found that comprehensive reform approaches, like small learning communities, produce positive effects on ninth-grade promotion and the reduction of dropouts when implemented completely and carried out for an extended period of time. Because the grant was designed for implementing small learning community initiatives, not planning, each school had little preparation time to thoroughly investigate the best way to implement each freshman academy structure. Numerous school personnel believed the three year grant limited the amount of time they had to both implement and produce positive results. The grant also provided funding for professional development, incentive-based activities, Keystone activities, and a stipend for

both district-level and site-based personnel. Aness (1997) alluded to the importance of securing funding for the livelihood of small learning communities. According to the grant, schools were to secure outside funding during the grant period to alleviate this issue. However, with the grant expiring at the end of the 2006-2007 school year, not one school had a financial contributor. As a result, each school was left without means for continued funding of their existing programs, including supplementing their lead teachers and small learning community coordinator. Additionally, school personnel also believed there was a lack of effectiveness in communicating the grant's purpose. Many thought that the small learning community grant was solely for the implementation of ninth-grade academies and were surprised when they realized it was a whole-school reform initiative. Additionally, school personnel called for a clearer understanding of what the grant covered and how freshman academy initiatives were to operate after the expiration of the grant. Many believed that their freshman academy would no longer exist once the grant expired. School district personnel, site-based leadership, and teachers need to understand their freshman academy's purpose and vision. Overall, communicating a clear vision is essential to the overall success of small learning communities (Aness, 1997).

Dealing with Outside Influences

Schools do not operate in isolation. Schools are interconnected and regulated, to some degree, by the school district, state department of education, and federal government. Laws such as the Class-Size Reduction Initiative, and school district mandates such as the new eight period day schedule, are perceived by some to limit the longevity of freshman academy initiatives. Outside influences are important to consider as they may serve as obstacles that affect the degree reform initiatives can be fully implemented (Aness, 1997).

Implications

The findings from this study cannot be generalized to all students making the transition from middle to high school. Additionally, findings cannot be generalized to all freshman academies, as each is unique in their construction and may not have grant funding as did the three schools highlighted in the current study. Despite these limitations, the findings from this study have implications for local education agencies, site-based administrators, and teachers.

Local Education Agencies

Since 2001, the federal government has provided local education agencies with federal funding for the planning, implementation, or expansion of small learning communities as a part of *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, Title V, Part D, Subpart 4 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 7249). In Florida alone, since 2001, 18 school districts have received federal funding for the planning, implementation, or expansion of small learning communities. Currently, federal grants are being offered for up to 60 months. In 2003, when the school district highlighted in the present study applied for the federal grant, such grants were only awarded for 36 months. Whole-school reform of this magnitude may take longer than three years to effectively implement and secure outside funding to maintain. Converting an already existing large school into smaller entities is a least a two-year planning process (SRI International, 2003). Local education agencies must consider the amount of time and funding it takes to institute school reform. A high level of authentic district level support is essential if schools are to successfully reform their existing structure to create small learning communities, including freshman academies. Schools need district level support to include supplemental funding, professional development opportunities, help with establishing business partnerships, flexibility with district level policies and procedures, and patience for achievement changes.

Site-based Administrators

Site-based administrators are responsible for communicating and implementing the vision of their school. The vision of implementing small learning communities within an already existing school requires a solid commitment from site-based administration. As highlighted in the present study, administrative buy-in and support seemingly made a substantial difference on the extent to which each freshman academy initiative was implemented. Additionally, in order to truly manage multiple small communities, including a freshman academy, a certain type of leadership style may be required. Such leaders may need to be more collaborative, creating opportunities for teachers, other staff members, even students to have leadership responsibilities. Lastly, steadfast support to insure that each freshman academy initiative is completely carried out is essential. Results appear to be minimal if such programs are not fully operational.

Teachers

Establishing a freshman academy has numerous implications for teachers within the academy. First, teachers must be committed to working with ninth-graders. Many high school teachers, especially veteran faculty, are not used to dealing with younger adolescents. Freshman academy teachers need to understand the developmental needs of such students and accommodate their curriculum and instructional practices accordingly. Second, freshman academy teachers must be willing to work as a team for the improvement of student learning. Consequently, due to the teaming concept, coupled with common teacher planning and classroom proximity, teachers must be willing and able to work collaboratively with others outside of their academic discipline. Although interdisciplinary teaming is a relatively new phenomenon in high school, middle and elementary school teachers have been teaming for years. Third, teachers must be willing to create a student-centered classroom where curriculum is rigorous, relevant, and integrated. Fourth, being a freshman academy teacher also requires

teachers to be advisors and mentors. Ninth-grade students need an adult advocate, someone they can talk to about school and personal-related issues. Fifth, working with ninth-graders, within a freshman academy, requires teachers to be flexible. Lastly, as Mrs. Mauch, principal of School A stated, “You’re not asking them to do more. Just asking them to do it different” [Mrs. Mauch, Aai-p9].

Implications for Further Research

The current study exposed several topics that merit further investigation. One of the areas requiring addition research deals with the effect grants have on school reform strategies. The schools highlighted in this study, like many other schools throughout the nation, received a three year federally funded, small learning community implementation grant. Since the school district won the grant, the federal government expanded the duration of the grant. Although the federal government increased the duration of the grant period, further investigation into the amount of time and effects grants have on school reform initiatives is necessary. How does receiving a grant influence the implementation of the small learning community school reform initiative? What happens to the vitality of the program when the grant expires?

A second topic for consideration is the influence of legislation and school district decisions have on school reform efforts. Both the school district’s small learning community director and School C’s administrator spoke of how Florida’s class size reduction amendment was projected to dramatically affect the vitality of their small learning communities. Exactly how does this legislation influence school reform efforts like small learning communities? How do school district rules, policies, and procedures affect the implementation of whole-school reform?

A third topic that calls for further investigation deals with commitment and support. Schools wishing to institute reform efforts like small learning communities and freshman academies need to elicit district-level, administration, faculty, staff, student, parent, and

community buy-in and support. How can schools gain support for freshman academy and small learning community reform initiatives from all invested stakeholders?

A fourth topic worthy of further investigation is the freshman transition course, Keystone. A more detailed inquiry into its specific elements, position in the curriculum (semester course, yearlong course, seminar, eighth grade course), and its long-term effects on teaching and learning is necessary. When is the most beneficial time for students to learn how to make the transition to high school, focus on study skills, and learn the personal, emotional, and social skills required to be successful in both high school and life? How long should such a course be? Do the skills learned in such a course produce any long-term benefits for students?

A fifth topic needing further exploration deals with ways high school teachers implement developmentally appropriate teaching strategies. All three schools mentioned needing more professional development to help with the development of a student-centered curriculum. How might schools, intending to implement freshman academies, better prepare their teachers to implement developmentally appropriate, student-centered curriculum?

A sixth topic needing additional attention deals with implementing complete school reform, not just structural reform. Small learning community reform requires curriculum re-development. How can schools strike a balance between organizational reform and curriculum reform?

A seventh topic worthy of further investigation pertains to strategies that will increase purity among teams in large high schools. Purity of student-teacher transition teams is imperative for the longevity of the freshman academy. How can large high schools organize their students and teachers to increase purity among teams? What priorities must be reorganized for greater team purity to be reached?

An eighth topic deals with increasing parent involvement. The present study did not address parental involvement with the freshman academy and the middle-to-high-school transition. Transition literature and small learning community literature clearly indicates the importance of parental involvement during the move to high school. Unfortunately, parent involvement tends to decline as students progress through the K-12 educational system. What can schools do to get parents involved with both their students' high school and freshman academy? How can schools keep parents involved throughout their students' high school years? How might parent involvement help students make the transition to high school?

A ninth topic pertains to funding. All three schools, as part of the small learning community grant, were supposed to forge partnerships with local businesses in an effort to financially support their small learning communities. How realistic is such a requirement? How can schools approach businesses to solicit school-business partnerships to fund grade-wide programs such as freshman academies?

A tenth topic needing further exploration deals with professional development. Although development opportunities were offered, faculty and staff from each school expressed the desire for additional professional development. How do the current types of professional development help teachers implement freshman academy programs and practices? What types of professional development opportunities are most needed to help successfully implement freshman academy initiatives? What model of professional development is most successful?

A final topic warranting further research involves student achievement. The present study did not directly measure student achievement levels to see if there is a correlation between freshman academies and student achievement. Although research in the area of freshman academy student academic gains is available, more research is needed to link academic gains to

specific freshman academy structures. How do specific freshman academy initiatives (e.g., teaming, proximity, Keystone) affect student achievement?

Summary

The main research question sought to gain insight on whether stage-environment fit theory shed light on how freshman academies might help students make the transition to high school in developmentally appropriate ways. Each of the guiding questions helped to create a more complete, contextualized understanding of how freshman academies might help students acclimate to their new high school. Results indicate that stage-environment fit theory has substantial validity to support school reform at this level. The findings from the present study seem to suggest that freshman academies help to personalize the high school experience when freshman academy initiatives are fully implemented.

It is the intent of freshman academy initiatives to create a personalized learning environment that is smaller, more student-centered, and developmentally supportive. Freshman academies in the present study attempted to create a personalized learning environment by implementing a variety of initiatives, including student-teacher interdisciplinary teaming with common planning, transition programs, academic and social support programs, a freshman transition course, and incentive-based activities. Additionally, School B implemented proximity and School A and C created advisory-like programs. In all three schools, the above-listed initiatives attempted to personalize the freshman learning environment by creating a sense of belonging to the school community, establishing a supportive and collaborative environment, catering teaching and learning to freshmen, and creating a culture of commitment to ninth-grade success. Each school experienced successes and struggles with creating such a student-focused, personalized setting. Overall, these findings suggest that freshman academy initiatives may only be truly effective and beneficial when completely and effectively implemented. Common

freshman academy initiatives that were not fully implemented include teaming, proximity, advisory, academic support programs, and social support programs. Keystone, although completely implemented at each school site, appears to be most beneficial when taken immediately after making the move to high school. Otherwise, its perceived usefulness decreases. Incentive-based programs reportedly were helpful in encouraging academic success. Transition programs also appear to be of benefit to helping students make the transition to high school but would be more beneficial if upperclassmen were more actively involved and vertical collaboration between schools increased.

It is commonly believed that the freshman academy may help students make the transition to high school by personalizing the learning environment to the needs of ninth graders. Although this notion of creating a personalized learning environment is not new, the present study extends current understanding to include school leaders', teachers', and students' perceptions of their freshman academy. This study may also expand Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory to include young adolescence by suggesting that developmentally appropriate school organizational environments, such as freshman academies, when fully implemented create a smoother transition for students during the middle-to-high-school transition. Implications for local education agencies, site-based administrators, and teachers were suggested along with 11 topics that merit further investigation.

APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

Parent Informed Consent

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am a graduate student in the College of Education Department of Teaching & Learning at the University of Florida, conducting research on freshman academies and the middle school to high school transition. The purpose of this study is gain insight into how freshman academies may help students make the transition to high school in developmentally appropriate ways. The results of the study may help add to the research on freshman academies, the middle to high school transition, and small learning communities. These results may not directly help your child today, but may benefit future students. With your permission, I would like to ask your child to volunteer for this research.

All participating children will participate in 1-2 focus group interviews during school hours where they will discuss their freshman academy experiences. Each group interview will be videotaped and last no longer than 60 minutes. The video will be accessible only to the researcher for verification and transcription purposes. At the end of the study, the videotape will be erased. Each student will receive a pseudonym to increase confidentiality. Your child will be allowed to make up any work missed as a result of participating in this study. Participation or non- participation in this study will not affect the children's grades or any other aspect of your child's schooling.

You and your child have the right to withdraw consent for your child's participation at any time without consequence. Your child does not have to answer any questions s/he does not want to answer. There are no known risks or immediate benefits to the participants. No compensation is offered for participation. If you have any questions about this research protocol, please contact me at 813-928-0397 or my faculty supervisor, Dr. George, at 352-392-9191 ext. 237. Questions or concerns about your child's rights as research participant may be directed to the UFIRB office, University of Florida, Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611, (352) 392-0433. Please sign and return this copy of the letter. A second copy is provided for your records. By signing this letter, you give consent for your child to participate in this study.

Thank you in advance for considering this request.

Cheryl Kmiec

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily give my consent for my child, _____, to participate in Cheryl Kmiec's study on how freshman academies may help students make the transition to high school. I have received a copy of this description.

Parent / Guardian Signature

Date

2nd Parent / Witness Signature

Date

Teacher Informed Consent

Protocol Title: Freshman Academies and the Transition to High School

Purpose of the research study: To investigate how freshman academies may help students make the transition to high school.

What you will be asked to do in the study: You will be asked to participate in two focus groups and 1-2 individual interviews where you will be asked to openly talk about your school's freshman academy and the middle to high school transition, allow the researcher to observe your classroom, provide evidence of how the academy is organized and how it operates on a daily basis, and provide the researcher with important archival evidence related to the freshman academy program.

Time required: 4 hours

Risks and Benefits: No more than minimal risk. The tape recorded interviews will be deleted after all research has been gathered and transcribed. The video-recorded focus group sessions and classroom observations will be deleted after all research has been gathered and transcribed. There is no direct benefit to the participant in this research. However, this study will add to the research on small learning communities and, more specifically, how freshman academies may help students make the transition to high school in developmentally appropriate ways. This research project can be used by school districts, state departments of education, teachers and school-based administrators, educational foundations, state lawmakers, and school board officials to better understand and improve the transition process into high school. There are no direct benefits to participants. No more than minimal risk is anticipated.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participating in the study.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. The final results will be presented as partial completion of a Ph.D. program, to educational journals for possible publication, and discussed at educational conferences.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer or share any archival evidence you do not want to share.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Cheryl Kmiec, Graduate Student, College of Education, 813-928-0397

Paul George, Ed.D., College of Education, 2215-C Norman Hall, 392-9191 ext. 237

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; ph 392-0433.

I have read the procedure outlined above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study and have received a copy of this description.

Participant's signature and date

Principle investigator's signature and date

Administrator & Site-based Small Learning Coordinator Informed Consent

Protocol Title: Freshman Academies and the Transition to High School

Purpose of the research study: To investigate how freshman academies may help students make the transition to high school.

What you will be asked to do in the study: You will be asked to participate in two, 60 minute interviews where you will be asked to openly talk about your school's freshman academy and the middle to high school transition. Additionally, you will be asked to provide evidence of how the academy is organized and how it operates on a daily basis, allow the researcher to observe freshman academy classrooms and school functions, and provide the researcher with important archival evidence related to the small learning community and freshman academy program.

Time required: 2 hours

Risks and Benefits: No more than minimal risk. The tape recorded interviews will be deleted after all research has been gathered and transcribed. There is no direct benefit to the participant in this research. However, this study will add to the research on small learning communities and, more specifically, how freshman academies may help students make the transition to high school in developmentally appropriate ways. This research project can be used by school districts, state departments of education, teachers and school-based administrators, educational foundations, state lawmakers, and school board officials to better understand and improve the transition process into high school. There are no direct benefits to participants. No more than minimal risk is anticipated.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participating in the study.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. The final results will be presented as partial completion of a Ph.D. program, to educational journals for possible publication, and discussed at educational conferences.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer or share any archival evidence you do not want to share.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Cheryl Kmiec, Graduate Student, College of Education, 813-928-0397

Paul George, Ed.D., College of Education, 2215-C Norman Hall, 392-9191 ext. 237

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; ph 392-0433.

I have read the procedure outlined above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study and have received a copy of this description.

Participant's signature and date

Principle investigator's signature and date

School District Small Learning Coordinator Informed Consent

Protocol Title: Freshman Academies and the Transition to High School

Purpose of the research study: To investigate how freshman academies may help students make the transition to high school.

What you will be asked to do in the study: You will be asked to participate in two, 60 minute interviews where you will be asked to openly talk about the school district's small learning community initiative including the implementation of freshman academies. Specifically, you will be asked to discuss the districts investment in establishing freshman academies to help students make the transition to high school, denote schools with active freshman academies that meet the criteria set forth by this study, and provide the researcher with important archival evidence related to the district and state level involvement in small learning community and freshman academy programs.

Time required: 2 hours

Risks and Benefits: No more than minimal risk. The tape recorded interviews will be deleted after all research has been gathered and transcribed. There is no direct benefit to the participant in this research. However, this study will add to the research on small learning communities and, more specifically, how freshman academies may help students make the transition to high school in developmentally appropriate ways. This research project can be used by school districts, state departments of education, teachers and school-based administrators, educational foundations, state lawmakers, and school board officials to better understand and improve the transition process into high school. There are no direct benefits to participants. No more than minimal risk is anticipated.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participating in the study.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. The final results will be presented as partial completion of a Ph.D. program, to educational journals for possible publication, and discussed at educational conferences.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer or share any archival evidence you do not want to share.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Cheryl Kmiec, Graduate Student, College of Education, 813-928-0397

Paul George, Ed.D., College of Education, 2215-C Norman Hall, 392-9191 ext. 237

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; ph 392-0433.

I have read the procedure outlined above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study and have received a copy of this description.

Participant's signature and date

Principle investigator's signature and date

APPENDIX B STUDENT ASSENT

I am a student in the College of Education at the University of Florida. As part of my studies, I'm conducting a research project on how freshman academies may help students, like you, make the transition to high school. I'm hoping to be able to learn more about both your freshman academy experiences and your transition from middle school to high school. This study will help educators better understand how to help students successfully make the transition into high school. I would like to ask you to be a part of this study.

If you want to be a part of this study, you will meet with me and a group of your peers 1-2 times during school to talk about your freshman academy experiences and how you adjusted to high school. Each group meeting will last up to 60 minutes. You will be videotaped but only I will watch the videotape. I need to tape each group interview so I can keep track of who said what. I will erase the tape at the end of this project. When I write my paper you will be given a different name so no one reading the paper will be able to trace the findings back to you.

Your participation is voluntarily. You do not have to be a part of this study if you do not wish. If you want to participate, please know you do not need to answer any question you do not wish to answer. You will not receive anything for being a part of this study. Your participation or non participation will not affect your grades or your standing in school in any way. You will be able to make up any class work missed as a result of being a part of my project.

You have a choice whether you would like to be a part of this study or not. Would you like to participate?

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Teacher Interview Guide

I want to invite you to share your ideas regarding your school's freshman academy. I would like to ask you a few questions and see where the dialogue takes us.

1. How has the freshman academy influenced the way you teach and manage your classroom?
2. How has the freshman academy affected student-teacher relationships?
3. What are your thoughts regarding the freshman academy and whether or not it helps students transition to high school?
4. Talk to me about the professional development/in-service opportunities offered by the county/school.
5. Describe how administration supports the freshman academy.
6. Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions or comments?

Thank you for your time.

Site-based Small Learning Coordinator Interview Guide

I want to invite you to share your ideas regarding your school's freshman academy and how it may help students make the transition to high school. I would like to ask you a few questions and see where the dialogue takes us.

1. Let's talk about _____ High School. Describe the school to me.
2. Explain why _____ High School decided to implement a freshman academy.
3. How did _____ High School implement the academy?
4. Let's talk about how your school currently organizes its freshman academy. Describe your freshman academy.
5. What transition elements does your academy implement?
6. Describe your duties as the small learning community coordinator?
7. What are your impressions of the freshman academy?
8. What are the outcomes of the freshman academy program?
9. Elaborate on the developmentally appropriate nature of the freshman academy.
10. Describe how you went about getting administration and teachers to buy-in to the small learning community, freshman academy reform idea.
11. Talk to me about the professional development/in-service opportunities offered by the county/school.
12. If you could change one thing about the freshman academy, what would it be?
13. How do you perceive your freshman academy evolving over the next school year/school years?
14. Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions or comments?

Thank you for your time.

Administrator Interview Guide

I want to invite you to share your ideas regarding your school's freshman academy and how it may help students make the transition to high school. I would like to ask you a few questions and see where the dialogue takes us.

1. Let's talk about _____ High School. Describe the school to me.
 2. Explain why _____ High School decided to implement a freshman academy.
 3. How did _____ High School implement the academy?
 4. Let's talk about how your school currently organizes its freshman academy. Describe your freshman academy.
 5. Elaborate on the developmentally appropriate nature of the freshman academy.
 6. What transition elements does your academy implement?
 7. What aspects of the freshman academy were easiest to implement?
 8. What challenges did you face with implementing the freshman academy?
 9. What are the outcomes of the freshman academy program
 10. Describe how you went about getting administration and teachers to buy-in to the small learning community, freshman academy reform idea.
 11. Talk to me about the professional development/in-service opportunities offered by the county/school.
 12. What are your perceptions on the freshman academy concept?
 13. If you could change one thing about the freshman academy, what would it be?
 14. How do you perceive your freshman academy evolving over the next school year/school years?
 15. What advice would you give principals that are planning to implement a freshman academy?
 16. Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions or comments?
- Thank you for your time.

School District Small Learning Community Interview Guide

I want to invite you to share your ideas regarding the school district's small learning community initiative including freshman academies, the implementation of such programs, the district's vision for such programs, and the results such program are producing. I would like to ask you a few questions and see where the dialogue takes us.

1. Let's talk about the school district as a whole. Describe the school district to me.
2. Why did the school district decide to get involved with the small learning community reform initiative?
3. How did the school district decide to get involved with the small learning community reform initiative?
4. How were the four original small learning community schools selected?
5. Let's talk about each of the three schools that are implementing the small learning community concept. Describe the small learning communities including the freshman academies at each school.
6. For the sake of this study, the following criteria will be used to determine which schools within your district will be asked to participate in this study. Based upon your knowledge of the school district and each participating school, which schools meet the following criteria:
 - Have active freshman academies
 - Have freshman academies in operation for at least two consecutive years
 - Freshman academies were instituted under the same grant
 - Freshman academies serve a diverse student population of students at-risk during the transition

- Freshman academy personnel are willing to participate
7. Describe the district's focus on ninth graders.
 8. Talk to me about your perceptions on the developmental appropriateness of your district's freshman academies.
 9. Talk to me about your perceptions on whether or not the implementation of freshman academies in each of the school's under investigation are helping students make the transition to high school.
 10. Talk to me about the professional development/in-service opportunities offered by the county.
 11. Discuss the outcomes of each school's small learning communities and freshman academies. What is the school district's long-term vision for this high school reform initiative?
 12. Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions or comments?
- Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX D
EXAMPLES OF RAW INTERVIEW DATA

School District Interview Excerpt

[Mrs. Prado, SDi-p4-7, Lines 190-295]

R: ...[W]hat is the district's thoughts now that you've had a few years of schools running these programs, what are they thinking now in regards to the overall effectiveness of the small learning community and then maybe the freshmen component? I guess it's a two part question.

MRS. PRADO: The superintendent one hundred percent supports SLC's and she, I like to call it, she birthed magnets very early on. She really did and magnets are SLCs. One hundred percent support. I would like to say everyone has that philosophy but I couldn't tell you that for sure. A lot of it is. I think some people wanted to see faster results. The first SLC grants of which we were a part of was a three year grant. Those grants are now five year grants because change cannot happen really in three years. You take a, depending on the school, if I was a new principal right now, if I was going to open a school, I would open it as a SLC school with or without money because another school in another county is an SLC school without any money so it is possible then the people when you hire them, so you hire with that philosophy. But when you take a school that has a veteran faculty it, change doesn't happen over night and I think some people who are real data driven wanted to say, "Okay, you've been an SLC school for three years. Why are you not an A?" Well there's a lot of other factors and I think, we pray, and I talk to Mrs. Mauch, the principal and Mr. Ramell APC at School A, and I just pray all the time if School A becomes a B, well there's our proof. But there's so many other factors that impact a school grade. First of all, it's testing in one day, but that's a whole other FCAT story. But to turn that ship and like I said, watch teachers collaborate. You can mandate it, but it won't happen. You have to change the culture and so do I think you have to get there? Yes. Do I think it's a process? Oh, most definitely. Is it painful? Some days it's really painful. There was one point in time when I said, "Okay. We're going wall to wall." Well, I thought my department heads were just going to jump out the windows [claps], like cut their throats. So I said, "Okay. What's the problem here?" "Well Mrs. Prado, not yet, we've got to move slower," so I really backed away from that. Because they're like, "We know you're the principal. You tell us what to do it and we'll do it but we're not going to be happy with it." So you can't do that. I said you've really got to get to the point where you get these kind of comments now four years later from some of those biggest nay sayers doing that collaboration and saying, "Oh my gosh, what would we do if we don't have SLC." Because now it's a good thing because they've seen what happens. Four years later. Four years later so I think that change movement, it certainly helps if you have the superintendent that we have now saying, I'm not saying that our former superintendent wasn't for it either but just the current superintendent is such an advocate. We were absolutely devastated that we didn't get this last grant. We just were devastated. We just knew we were going to get it. We didn't get it. We really want it because the money does help. It provides you with the lead teachers, stipends, which are so minimal, like three hundred dollars a month and they don't come out of the classroom. They just do this above

and beyond. It provided us with the SLC coordinator because it's easy to say this can happen but the demands that are on everybody's plate, if you don't have somebody who's supporting this out of the classroom, there aren't enough hours in the day. There just aren't enough hours in the day. So that piece alone is why the grant is helpful. You know, if you opened a school that way you could structure things, but I don't know with the class size reduction, I don't know.

MRS. PRADO: But it is all those things begin to impact what can happen because again, teachers are teaching six out of seven, it's hard for them to want to volunteer as much.

R: Absolutely. It sounds like the district has overall the focus is really in support of this concept hoping that we're get another grant

MRS. PRADO: We're going to write this next one. I mean we're going to write it. Pray that we get it again and honestly and truly, if we weren't in such tough economic times to just continue to pay those leads and the coordinators, at least those three sites, School C, School A, and School B, what a benefit. What a benefit, but I know School A and School B because they do have some additional, School B has Title I. You know, they are looking to try to keep Mr. Hanes on and School A's going to do some kind of share thing with Mr. Bandery to keep him on but the lead stipends are gone.

R: Is that really what the two main areas that of which the grant helped pay for?

MRS. PRADO: And staff development. No, that grant is staff development. You can't make change without staff development.

R: Can you talk to me a little bit about maybe what the district does for the staff development for SLC's? Is it district based? Is it site based?

MRS. PRADO: Well, with the grant it was site based. Bringing those teachers in with phenomenal trainers and exposing them and having team collaboration, teaching them how to work together. Not only just, not only just the teachers but bringing in your lead people, your administrators, your guidance personnel, and attaching everybody to a community so that, learning how to collaborate, all those pieces of facilitative, facilitative leadership. They don't know that. You have to teach them how to run meetings and how you create the parking lot and you have the deltas and the. You have to teach them all those pieces, those components. I think our district does an outstanding job on training administrators in those components but not your department heads. So the SLC grant provided that staff development for total faculty, small groups within the faculty and how's everybody feel a piece of this puzzle and that was very important. Plus we also funded conference at the end of every year in June. We brought all the sites together with just nationally recognized speakers, Mark Thompson, Steve Barclay, just all those, to talk to them about change and what does this look like and of course, many people went to Daggett, the Daggett piece, really but the grant itself is truly to fund a little bit of personnel, but for staff development.

R: So then with the staff development it's really the sites themselves although there are some district components?

MRS. PRADO: Oh absolutely. Because I will tell you many, many high schools did the freshmen course and called it different things, but we called it keystone was the original name and there were many schools that put in that Keystone piece and they still have it. Some of them taught it through social studies. Some of them taught it through, it was a combination of teachers teaching it. I don't think it should ever be subject specific. I think it needs to be a combination because then they have to collaborate [inaudible] curriculum.

R: So it sounds like some of these ideas that these SLCs schools were selected to do have kind of sprawled out even amongst other schools.

MRS. PRADO: Oh most definitely. Especially ninth grade transition. What really helps those ninth graders? We actually published last year to all the high schools, well I wouldn't say publish but we printed it out. We certainly gave it to the two new schools. Because if you're an opening new school, okay, and knowing what the populations are going to look like, the demographics for those two schools, and being low performing kids and we said if you want to start successfully then you need to do like these ten things. We narrowed it down to ten items. You need to do these ten things so your freshmen can feel connected and be successful and that really came out of what we learned those schools that were involved in the SLC piece.

R: So it seems like not even the schools but the district's really focusing on freshmen.

MRS. PRADO: I think so.

R: Can you talk to me a little bit about maybe where the district is hoping to go with that focus? Do we have any indication?

MRS. PRADO: No. Because what I heard at the APC meeting yesterday was there are some schools now that have always done the Keystone class that are no longer able to do the keystone class because we're back to the thing we began with units, six out of seven, class size reduction and that's not a class size reduction unit, so schools that have done it for three and four years now are now pulling away from it.

R: All because of these extraneous things not because it doesn't work.

MRS. PRADO: Correct. But I'm telling you, we do know things and we do know if you do these things. So much of that comes out of, it goes way back to the seven habits of highly effective schools. This is not new stuff. It's like, if you do this, you will get this. It's not easy but it's pretty cut and dry.

Administrator Interview Excerpt

[Cai-p4-5, Lines 192-274]

R: Are you able to keep purity to some extent?

MR. BROADAWAY: Oh, yeah. There will be very few. Purity in that the whole class is. Like if you were a Keystone teacher and I was the English teacher. The kids that you might

have first period, all those same kids in that same grouping may not be in my fifth period English class. Because those teachers will have five or six classes. But everybody in your Keystone class will have me for English somewhere else during the day. That's the goal. And like I said, the only thing that scares us, and this is an issue, is as we come in, depending on how the master flow is running. If you have 24 kids in your Keystone class and I have 25 kids in my English class. I mean I have all those 24 you have. You have all those 25 sometime in the day. A new kid walks in the door in October. He gets assigned to your class. Okay, that's number 25. You're within class size reduction. But in all my English classes I'm at 25. I'm maxed. And that's the part that we lose the purity but again that's where class size reduction hand ties us a little bit. But I hope that doesn't happen too much. We'll see next year. If we truly do a good job of balancing classes and we set our master up well. Which is what we're in the process of doing right now. For example, we were in our first scheduling round for next year yesterday. And at the ninth grade level we got 629 kids in the computer. Out of the 629 kids there's 6751 requests. Of course, this is the statistics I got from the printout. We met 6369 of them. We had 94% of the things satisfied. Now that's a pretty good number. Now, that's first schedule run. So, we'll sit down here. We'll look at the new ingredients and say, you know 6% of those kids, we're talking 6% of 630. We're talking about 40 kids. We've got 40 of our incoming 629 kids that we can't meet their thing right now. Now, it may be something as simple as an elective causes problem. Like if they chose a single elective. Like if they wanted African American history, that's a one-semester class. And it's only being taught one period of the day and, boom, that's where it is. And so that bumped him out of him being able to take Keystone that period and it causes an issue we may have to make some choices. But that's the first run and I'm pretty pleased with the ninth grade. Matter of fact, now you can see there 94% of the ninth grade and 93% of our tenth grade. So that first run is pretty sweet satisfying those course requests. So, you know, hopefully we can iron that out. But I'm sure that when push comes to shove there's gonna be a couple kids, I want to say cross teamed or something. And that's unfortunate because I really, I'm a true believe in that cause I've seen it work. Community leaders talked about how, you know, Jeff's not doing well. And you call in Jeff and his mom and your sitting in front of the English teacher, the Keystone teacher, the American Government teacher and they're all talking about Jeff. And Jeff's doing the same thing in my class. I can't get him to bring a pencil or paper. That's pretty powerful when, you know, your sitting there and meeting three people all saying the same thing. It's not like a one person ganging up on me. You don't like me, that kind of thing. No, there's three teachers saying the same language. Pretty powerful.

R: That actually brings me to one of my next questions. What elements do you think were in place this year that really helped the kids make that transition to high school.

MR. BROADAWAY: Teaming. I've said it before that the teaming is the best thing we did this year. You know the one thing that we've got to figure out school wide, and this is me, self analysis, critiquing us. The one thing we've got to find a better way. And this is school wide, this doesn't have anything to do with small learning communities. This is a school wide issue for us, and for all schools, is the attendance. Attendance is a real [emphasis] concern. I talk about the teachers. They're the ones that make the difference everyday in class. Well, if the kid's not in class you can't make a difference. You can't make the connections. If the kid doesn't feel like he belongs or has a sense of identity. Well, if the

kid's not in school he won't find it. So, the challenge that I see, school wide, is figuring out a way to improve the attendance. And this year we had an attendance committee. A calling committee that did some calling. I think that will be helpful. You know, one of the things, the new pieces, the new tool that district wide we got that we just field tested is this IRIS, a new response information system where I have the ability to form groups and it's a web based server where I can leave a message and send it to certain parents. I mean, I can send a message to only my freshman parents. Send a message to my senior class parents. I can send a message to my faculty. And again, the types of things it's designed for is if you have emergencies. Well, attendance is an emergency for me. Okay, so, you know and again the only problem with that is those calls in that system is only as good as what the parents give us to input in the mainframe. But, the teaming this year was, by far, the best thing we did. And as teachers in the teams they share that frustration with attendance. I don't know what role or how that teaming can help with attendance but that's what I'd like to figure out a way to do. But the teaming was the best thing we did this year and having that Keystone course. You know, some of that conflict resolution we talked about. Yeah, we've got a Student Intervention Specialist, but you know, she doesn't meet with small groups of kids. Usually, it's a one on one. You see two kids arguing in the hallway. Boom, get these two kids. Let's do a little peer mediation deal. Boom. It's still nice to be able to talk to a classroom. Like, you know, if you've got Mr. Jettings teaching that kind of course and talking about conflict. You know, what's important, what's not important. What do you do? If you've got conflict and someone's picking on you. What do you do? Somebody's bullying you, what do you do? I mean, you know, some kids are going to say well, I'll just be quiet cause if you go squeal. No, you don't handle things by hoping they go away. You address issues. So, that class gives them a chance to talk about life, if you will. And it's not Algebra or American Government, Biology. You know, it's or Beowulf, English. I mean, it's what's happening in school. And that's the one class where, talk about relevancy, that's as relevant as it gets. And if we can, like I told Mr. Jettings, and I didn't know, I said "Mr. Jettings, how much work do we do on study skills, time management and stuff like that?" And he said, "Well, Mr. Broadway we've got units in that." Because some of these kids, you know, I'm not there to talk about study skills. Those are those things we assume. You know, I don't know how we get it. Do we expect to get it by osmosis? I mean, it's just like anything. You've got to be taught. You've got to have exposure to it. So, those two things the teaming and the course are by far the key elements to making it work.

Site-based Small Learning Coordinator Interview Excerpt

[Aslcci,2-p9-10, Lines 368-441]

R: Developmentally thinking about the ninth grade academy or team concept and SLC concept going through twelfth, how do you think that developmentally fits with the needs of your kids?

MR. BANDERY: I think it's vital. I think it's vital because these students, developmentally, what psychology tells us is their strongest need at this age group, especially going through eleventh and twelfth grade, is a need to fit and be a part of something. In high school, in a typical high school environment, unless they get plugged in

to a strong electives program or plugged into a club environment, the only place they get that is their groups or their gangs or their friends. And if they don't have a group of friends or anything like that, that's where we lose so many of them and so many of these students will not go join a club on their own or go seek out to be a part of the automotive program. We have a lot of strong electives programs and the students that get plugged into those programs, especially in our case, our music programs, Drama, the kids that get plugged into that, they have a reason to come to school. They have that thing they feel they're a part of but so many of our students don't do that and that's why this is so vital. This takes every student and gives them a place of their own. And even at ninth grade. That was the difference between this year's Keystone group and last year's Keystone group. You've heard that from Mrs. Cartright. This year, they were a class, a team, an identity. Last year it was just a class they had to take. So developmentally all the way through it is very vital in giving these students a place to belong, a place to call, "I am part of the Communications Academy. I have a role. I have a role to play. I am a part of that and I have an advisor or a person who is watching over me, that is encouraging me to join clubs and to participate and do different things. I have four teachers that know my name and talk to each other."

R: Do they have opportunities at ninth grade to join clubs?

MR. BANDERY: Oh, absolutely.

R: Is that part of the curriculum for Keystone?

MR. BANDERY: Yes. Yes, in fact, I've got a power point that a teacher put together I can show you on joining clubs and extracurricular activities. Not only is that part of Keystone but that has also been a focal point in our pre-school camp for the freshmen that we've done every year.

R: Talk to me about pre-school camp.

MR. BANDERY: That was one of the qualifications of the grant. We run a camp, one or two days, I think in some cases other schools did three days to prepare the freshmen for school. We actually missed a year in there. We did it this last summer and two summers back. We're already planning this next year. It's come down to just one day but one day of excitement to bring them in. Again, another thing we're doing with the feeder middle school to bring these upcoming ninth graders into the school for a day. We tour them, show them around the school. The people that are doing it this year, of our eight Keystone teachers who are going to have all these students, seven of them are going to be running the camp that day and the eighth one isn't running the camp that day because he's running the Gap Camp with me the same day and we're going to tie that together so he'll still be here so they're going to meet all of their Keystone teachers that day before they even get to school. They're going to tour the school. There's a scavenger hunt. SGA is going to be presenting some things to them. Last year SGA came and did this Dress Code Fashion Show for the students. That was hilarious. They loved that. We have our Peer Counseling II kids are going to come in and do some work with them. Our English teacher want to come in and do some talks with them. So just a lot of things to help them get comfortable with the school. The whole purpose of that day is that whenever they come into school the

first day of school they're comfortable with their surroundings. They know where they're going. The goal for the last three years is students that come to this camp will not go through the experience that most freshmen do where they walk into the wrong class on the first day of school. They're going to know where they're going. They're going to know somewhat of who their teachers are, be familiar with the school. We've heard stories every year, the students who go through this camp are showing other freshmen where to go. In addition to that freshman camp, which will be the day before the teachers return, we also started this last year, a Freshmen Parent Night, which is separate from our open house and a couple of the other schools in the county have modeled this. One of the teachers that helped me put it together her son had done a similar thing at another school. It was really informal. We were just inviting the parents in to give them schedules, let them tour the school, and give them a brief presentation.

R: Before school starts?

MR. BANDERY: Yes. Two days actually before we did our formal open house. A lot of the parents came back for the open house to actually meet the teachers. We didn't require all of the teachers to be here that night. A lot of them came in to help but they weren't in the classrooms necessarily. This was just for the parents to be able to walk around the school, get familiar themselves with the school. There was a presentation. They re-ran the fashion show. Our administration got up and talked a bit and then we had the informal schedules you could go ahead and pick up. That was exciting for them. The coaches were available so a lot of them were talking with the coaches. It was a very informal session. We were planning on having about fifty parents showing up. We had three hundred fifty four people show up. Some students, some siblings. But we were standing room only in the auditorium and we have a large auditorium. Yeah, we were shocked, so this year we're putting a lot more effort into that night. In fact, we're no longer required to do this for the grant but we've had so much success with it we're doing it anyway. Again, everything we can do to transition these freshmen into this school as painlessly as we can. This year is going to be, I don't want to say rough, but this is the first year we're doing a lot of these transition processes so as we work out the kinks next year, next year's eighth graders are going to have. It's just exciting. There are some things we do that we go back and look at, "Well, that wasn't quite a great idea," but most everything we're doing we're seeing some success. It's like, "Why didn't we do this before?"

Freshman Lead Teacher Interview Excerpt

[Cfli-p1-2, Lines 1-81]

R: Could you just elaborate a little bit on how the small learning communities concept has emerged at School C and more specifically the focus on the ninth grade academy?

MRS. WILKINSON: Well, again it initially started with the grant. We had a couple small initiatives like they started with a Freshman Orientation program before the grant was even written. Which is a big pep rally they have where all the freshman are invited to attend and meet teachers, get schedules, get their IDs, sign up for clubs, for sports. Whatever to get them so that fear of the first day, getting lost and panicked isn't there. So we initiated that

before the grant. Once the grant had come a long we ran with it. We took that and expanded it and tied it in more to small learning communities. Specifically for freshman academy the only thing that exists are initiatives and the Keystone class. We don't separate students into hallways of ninth grade. They're not in a separate building. They're mixed with everyone else. And they also will take electives with multiple grade levels. They're not ninth grade only grade levels. The only two classes that ninth graders take are American Government and Keystone. That's this year. The prior years our APC removed Government the freshman year and moved it to senior year for one year and realized that didn't work so now we're back to the first year of freshman getting that. So, they're getting both of those classes and it's the only thing that they share in common. The only difference in the Government is one might be honors one might be regular. So, that's really the only similarities that our freshmen carry over. Other than the creations of teams this year this is the first time they were on true teams. Within their Community there are teacher teams. So, there's some core teachers that share students that would collaborate once a week that shared ninth graders. Unfortunately, some of those teachers were on multiple grade level teams and multiple Community teams so they had multiple students they had to relate to. We asked for the initiative to have one hall of our lower performing ninth grade students. Possibly two teams. It would be eight classrooms, two teams. The core courses and Keystone, which would be paired with Government. And that didn't happen. But we were hoping that that could happen just with our lower quartile. And again we've got teachers on board. It was an administrative thing that didn't follow through. And that's basically it with the ninth grade. We did lots of initiatives that a lot of the ninth grade stuff was tied into all the other Community initiatives too.

R: Can you talk about some of those?

MRS. WILKINSON: Of the ninth grade initiatives?

R: That were tied in.

R: We shared "Raising the Bar", the program where students were rewarded for grade improvement. So, not just students that got honor roll. Each nine weeks that they showed a grade improvement they received a certificate and they were put into a drawing and they could receive prizes. So, ninth graders participated in that. It wasn't just 10th-12th grade. Tutoring. Same thing. The tutoring initiatives. Actually the freshman failure list was the first failure list that the school started to create. My baby. And then they realized they should really be doing it for all grades so they could track failures. And then we would take that failure list and have anybody on there recommended for tutoring. Which a majority of them went whether it was once or a whole nine weeks. The tutoring was another initiatives actually started by freshman and then carried over to the entire school. We have the teaming concept which is the same initiative that we use. And there was actually one class they shared which was the same with all grade levels and ours was the Keystone that all students got that. But this was the first year that all students got the Keystone class. Prior years it was certain groups that received it. And it was either a scheduling error or the CAPS students didn't take it. They had their own. They weren't scheduled into it. This year everybody got it.

R: You also said this is the first time for core teams. Can you talk to me a little bit more about that?

MRS. WILKINSON: What they did they had the Government teacher since those were similar. The English teacher. They all had English. They all had Math. Similar levels of Math. And they all had the Keystone. They took those teachers, put them on a team. They met once a week and discuss student concerns, upcoming exam schedules, whatever it was that they needed to relay to. What they found was they were finding common students that were brought up all the time that might have fallen through the cracks prior. That teachers wouldn't talk to each other about them. What I found in the classrooms. A lot of times if a student failed my class I took it personally like, "you're not trying. You're not motivated." What we found was when teachers were discussing it amongst themselves the personal issue gets put aside and now it becomes a student issue. And in high school a lot of teachers take it personally. You're failing my class because you don't like it or you don't like me, whatever. So, now we've got teachers talking to each other. And it's teachers outside of the department. Which again, in high school they are very departmentalized. And they don't talk outside their departments. Some people attended regularly. Some people never attended. If you don't go regularly or at all it's kind of an ineffective tool. And there wasn't any kind of accountability for attending. So, if you said you'd get marked down on your evaluation if you don't go, people would go. But people's response was what are you going to do? And some people really loved the tool. Others kind of skirted around it. You know there's some that used communication. They used email instead. They would email all the teachers and go, anybody having an issue with this person. And then everybody would respond to that. In a way it was kind of teaming because you were talking amongst yourselves but again we didn't get them to the point of location where we would have loved to have them right there so they wouldn't have to meet once a week. They'd just see each other in the hallway and talk. We didn't get to the point of having team conference nights where we wanted to have all of our teachers there and they could hold their conferences. The only reason why we couldn't do that is because they weren't pure. Some people had three grade levels to meet and they'd have to excuse themselves and hold another conference. If we could get them to that level of purity then it would work out. But it's kind of dead. Next year it's not going to be there.

APPENDIX E
FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOLS

Teacher Focus Group Interview Guide

We are here as a group to openly share ideas regarding your school's freshman academy and how it may help students make the transition to high school. I would like to ask you a few questions and see where the dialogue takes us.

1. Let's talk about _____ High School. Describe the school to me.
 2. Explain why _____ High School decided to implement a freshman academy.
 3. How did _____ High School implement the academy?
 4. Let's talk about how your school currently organizes its freshman academy. Describe your freshman academy.
 5. Thinking back throughout the past year, what are your perceptions on the way the academy is organized and the extent it meets the developmental needs of ninth graders?
 6. Let's think back to the beginning of the year. In what ways do you believe your freshman academy helped students adjust to high school? Hindered?
 7. What are your impressions of how the academy affects what you teach and the way you teach?
 8. What are your impressions of how the freshman academy affects students learning?
 9. Elaborate on the developmentally appropriate nature of the freshman academy.
 10. If you could change one thing about the freshman academy, what would it be?
 11. How do you perceive your freshman academy evolving over the next school year/school years?
 12. Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions or comments?
- Thank you for your time.

Student Focus Group Interview Guide

We are here to openly talk about your experiences and feelings regarding entering high school and your freshman academy experience. I would like to ask you a few questions and see where the conversation takes us.

1. Think back to the end of your 8th grade year. What did you think high school would be like?
 2. How was high school similar / different from your thoughts?
 3. What were your first impressions of _____ high school?
 4. Think back to your first days and weeks at _____ high school. How did the administrators / teachers / fellow students help you adjust to high school?
 5. Describe your freshman academy.
 6. Describe a typical freshman academy school day.
 7. What are your thoughts on how the freshman academy helped you adjust to high school?
 8. What activities did the teachers and administrators plan for you?
 9. What are your feelings about the freshman academy?
 10. What do you like about the academy?
 11. What do you dislike about the academy?
 12. Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions or comments?
- Thank you for your time.

Leadership Focus Group Interview Guide

I want to invite you to share your ideas regarding your school's freshman academy and how it may help students make the transition to high school. I would like to ask you a few questions and see where the dialogue takes us.

1. Let's talk about _____ High School. Describe the school to me.
2. Explain why _____ High School decided to implement a freshman academy.
3. How did _____ High School implement the academy?
4. Let's talk about how your school currently organizes its freshman academy. Describe your freshman academy.
5. Elaborate on the developmentally appropriate nature of the freshman academy.
6. What transition elements does your academy implement?
7. What aspects of the freshman academy were easiest to implement?
8. What challenges did you face with implementing the freshman academy?
9. What are the outcomes of the freshman academy program
10. Describe how you went about getting administration and teachers to buy-in to the small learning community, freshman academy reform idea.
11. Talk to me about the professional development/in-service opportunities offered by the county/school.
12. What are your perceptions on the freshman academy concept?
13. If you could change one thing about the freshman academy, what would it be?
14. How do you perceive your freshman academy evolving over the next school year/school years?
15. What advice would you give principals that are planning to implement a freshman academy?
16. Is there anything that you would like to add? Do you have any questions or comments?

Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX F
EXAMPLES OF RAW FOCUS GROUP DATA

Leadership Focus Group Excerpt

[Alfg-p6-7, Lines 227-293]

R: Why did School A decide to try the small learning community concept and the ninth grade focus concept?

MR. BANDERY: Quite honestly, like everyone else, we were recognizing that we were struggling with our freshmen. We were recognizing that our graduation rates, and again, at the time we had a much higher population, much different population. This is my fifth year. When I came in five years ago right as this was coming in, we were struggling all over the map with everything and the opportunity came along to look at small learning communities. Now that wasn't my choice. That was administration at the time, Ms. K and Ms. Mauch took a look at, "Here's an opportunity that we can invest in and help our freshmen. Help our freshmen transition and help our freshmen stay and succeed. That was the initial goal. I was brought in, the project manager after we got the grant, but that was the reason for getting the grant was we need to do something to help our freshmen succeed and to stay in school. They were dropping through the cracks like mad. When the teachers in the different departments aren't talking to each other, don't know each other. The first thing I noticed my first year here teaching, there was a 125, a 130 other teachers here at the time, I knew the science teachers. I knew the seven, eight other science teachers. I didn't know any of the teachers in any of the other departments. I had a student struggling and I wanted to know how he was doing in his other classes. On my planning period, I'd have to go up to the office, pull the schedule, find out who these three teachers were, find out where they were, find out when their planning period was. Hopefully find time to find them, introduce myself and then have a conversation about this student. I may have done that with three students (chuckles) and they just fall into the cracks left and right so that was the big reason for doing this, was "How can we catch as many students as possible, keep them from falling through the cracks, and get them involved?" and like they've said, the school spirit. My experience the first three years here there wasn't a lot of school spirit because there wasn't a lot encouraging the students to get to know the school and become part of the community and that's changed, night and day difference now. There is a community, a real community concept here and there's a vast, a vast number of changes and reasons for that besides just what we've been talking about here as well. I think what one of our teachers does with the walk, the cancer walk every year has done a lot. There's just so many different things.

MR. RAMELL: Relay for Life.

MR. BANERY: The Relay for Life that has really come in and brought a sense of community that students are recognizing now.

MR. RAMELL: I really think that through the efforts with the ninth grade that we're going to move forward now to our other academies. Like this year we finally hit our stride with

that and see. Now, I mean our academies are set up for it. I mean, they're like, okay, the kids are going to go into these academies and they're going to be expecting that. As a matter of fact, I mean we hear that all year long, especially from our juniors, "How come they get to do this? How come they do?" You know, I mean

R: That's when you know something unique is going on is when students are noticing and questioning that they want that good thing, too.

MRS. CARTRIGHT: So yeah, the freshmen are frequently referred to as the most spoiled class, which is fine by me. They're worth it.

R: That's right and one beautiful thing. I think I'm hearing you all saying is, "These kids are staying so here they are now. We're not losing this momentum." You're going to carry this momentum into your next project which is to boost these academies and so it's you know, you've got the foundation now so now we're going to build the house and within a three year period we're going to have this complete house built upon the foundation and then moving forward.

MRS. CARTRIGHT: But the freshmen community and all the small learning communities just aren't affecting School A now. As I told our principal last week, it's affecting the community, too because we had, I asked, just on a whim. I didn't think I'd get him. A local radio show DJ celebrity, all the kids know him, very, very personable. I asked him if he would just come out and talk to the kids about the importance of education and I explained to him that we have a high dropout rate and this is why, that we lose a lot of freshmen because they're disconnected and they don't feel like school is for them. When you're fourteen, fifteen years old, how terrible is that and he came out and he watched. I brought him to my Keystone classes. The kids talked to him about it. He did a great pep rally and what is interesting is now I heard on his morning show that he's putting together at the local arena a big 'ol seminar day for any high school kid who wants to learn the importance of his education and to talk to them about the dropout rate and he's having other DJs and famous people come out and not talk at the kids but talk to them which is interesting because that's what I told him to do when he the pep rally so it's interesting, it's cool to see that it started here. We brought him in and he took away so much from the experience that he's sending it back out into the community and that's something that School A had a direct effect on which is awesome.

Teacher Focus Group Excerpt

[Btfg,c-p1-2, Lines 10-69]

R: ...Could you give me some insight into how you perceive your freshman academy or small learning community is organized at School B.

MRS. SMITH: I'll speak first. This is my second year involved in, on small learning communities. I feel like, when first got going, everyone was really excited about it and last year was really organized and people were really, really trying. I think this year, as soon as we hear that we did not get reapproved, I feel like people are like 'why are we doing this anymore'. Obviously, we haven't met in a while. But I really think the best thing that I

experienced from the small learning communities is the common students, the four of us having common students. I don't think it worked that well this year because we don't have as many common students as the scheduling didn't work out so well. But, for kids that we do have in common, I feel like it is so nice to go to a teacher and be like 'I can't take this kid. What are you doing that I'm not doing. Why is he doing well in your class and not mine'. Its nice to talk to other teachers. Even just to vent sometimes about a kid or a situation. It does create a community. And we've had it happen before, like I'll tell Mr. Cruz about an issue I'm having with a kid and he will talk to them in his class and the kid will be like 'how did you know that. How did you know that. How did you know that Mrs. .' Its nice to know that you have a team of teachers behind you. I think that's the best part of it, the common students.

R: Now you mentioned that because of scheduling that this year you may not have as many common students. How many do you have

MR. CRUZ: 50%

MRS. SMITH: About half. And sometimes it will be like Ms. Kantry and I will have a couple of kids. Or like Mr. Cruz. The four of us together common wise is probably about half.

MS. KANTRY: At least for me what was difficult as I've obviously never done this before. I was not an education major. I was a paralegal for seven years before I did this. It was the history's teacher to kind of be the mommy and I didn't get any training on that.

R: Was that implied?

MS. KANTRY: We had a course. It's through Keystone but there wasn't a lot of... I spent the first nine weeks, personally, doing some useless crap. Like, ok, here's the curriculum. But the second nine weeks I was like screw it, I'm not using the curriculum anymore. My kids are not looking at, um, what type of learner they are. They are trying to figure out how to stay alive and not get shot. I mean, I don't know if you all know this potential situation going on at School J with the drive by shooting. Where there's gang issues right now that are coming up. That's why there are cops over here.

R: Taking notes...

MS. KANTRY: You know, taking notes. They need, a lot of practical issues. For example, I didn't know we had a social worker at this school until second semester. We all had these kids. We had the CM's, RT's the MO's, that are out two-thirds. There should have been more of an intervention. At least for me I felt like I kind of wasted the first semester. I didn't waste it in getting to know them. I didn't waste it in seeing the comradery between us. I wasted it by not giving those kids what they needed. We weren't really given the directions, I wasn't given the direction. Maybe the other people that did it the year before were given more direction.

R: You can in this past year, whereas, the training wasn't offered to you because of...

MS. KANTRY: ...I had a one day training that I think I went to.

R: So definitely you could see some professional development to understand. Is that what you are saying?

MS. KANTRY: Ya, but the idea that we all were able. I'll give you an example. We have one mutual student, Mr. R, who was out for two days, and I'm freaking out because I'm thinking that the kid has been deported. And I mention it to her and she's saying it. We all. This is a kid that all of us have. He's a good kid. A really good kid and we were all like...

MRS. SMITH: ...and he has perfect attendance. And he missed two days. We came over and said she said, "Have you seen L?" "No, let me go ask Mr. Cruz. Have you seen L?" And nobodies seen him And we all know that he is here illegally and we were all "oh god."

MS. KANTRY: and he was like, "I was sick"

MRS. SMITH: But I'll tell you what, L realized that day how much we all cared about him.

Student Focus Group Excerpt

[Bsf-g-p6-8, Lines 238-324]

R: Lets go back to those first couple of weeks at School B. How did your administrators, teachers, and fellow students may or may not help you adjust?

Caitlyn: They didn't. The teachers did but the administrators didn't

Bruce: You had to adjust yourself.

Mika: Ms. Kantry was so cool...

Bruce: ...Ya she was cool...

Mika: ...She would talk to us about it. She told us it was going to be hard but we had to...

Bruce: ...that was Keystone.

Mika: It helped us a lot. And like, some teachers, the first day of school they give you work which I thought so unfair...

Bruce: ...Mr. P gave us homework...

Mika: ...the first day of school [emphasis]. They could have at least waited til the next week. The first couple days of school, just let us adjust. Tell us what we have to wear for high school. Tell us what we are going to go over. Tell us this and that but don't give us homework and notes the first day of school, the minute we get here.

R: You weren't expecting that, huh?

Mika: No! [emphasis] I thought it was going to be like middle school. School starts on Wednesday, Wednesday Thursday Friday they give you papers to fill out like your emergency contact card and that. And they told you 'this year we are going to talk about this, this, and this and we are going to help you prepare for this. And we are going to go over this FCAT skills.' Here the first day of school, 'here's some papers, here's some notes, here's some homework, here's your textbook.'

Bruce: Ya, that was Mr. P, wasn't it?

Mika: That was a lot of teachers, not just him.

R: You all said that your teachers helped you a little bit and you mentioned Mrs. Kantry...

Mika: ...Some...

R: ...And you mentioned the Keystone or freshman survival course. Talk to me a little...

Caitlyn: It taught us how to study. Like if there is a lot of tests over the year, you need to learn how to cope, how to study, and how to buckle down. You can't really have a lot of a life.

Mika: It was like teaching you how to study. It teaches you, 'well, if you don't know this, this is what you can do to not just memorize it but actually know it.' In middle school, you could memorize things and you would be ok but, in high school, it is not just about memorizing [emphasis], its about knowing [emphasis] it. You have to know it. Our advanced communications methods teacher Mr. L, he teaches you it. He taught us yesterday 'give a student knowledge and he'll use it for a day, teach a student knowledge and he'll use it for a lifetime'. It's like saying you can't just memorize something, you have to actually learn it and know it and that will help you do life. That is what Keystone is about. Just helping you to study and get you prepared. It was pretty much a preparing class, to prepare you for high school.

R: Do you think it was beneficial for you?

Mika: Umhmm.

Bruce: Ya.

Caitlyn: Very.

Mika: It helped me study a lot because, honestly, I really didn't know how to study. I just read the book. But now I take notes...

Caitlyn: ...break it down...

Mika: ...write notes in the margin, highlight, write little messages.

Caitlyn: Things that help you remember.

R: Is there anything about that particular course that you didn't find beneficial?

Caitlyn: No, it was mostly common sense...

Bruce: ...ya it was...

Caitlyn: ...it helped a lot though.

Mika: ...I was stuff you should have known but didn't know. There wasn't really anything that didn't help.

R: If I was to ask you to describe something called a freshman academy, would you know what that is and could you describe it?

Mika: No.

R: How about your team?

Mika: Team as in what?

R: Do you notice that you are in classes with similar people...

Mika: ...ya...

R: ...and have similar teachers?

Mika: Ya, for my first period it's always the same group of people...

Bruce: ...Its' like a group of fish going to the same place.

Mika: It's like the same people. It's all of us right here. But some people hang out with different people each day. But my first period, its all the same people. But my second period...

R: But actually in your classes, do you see the same people throughout the day?

Bruce: Ya.

Mika: Ya, some people.

Caitlyn: Like two or three. Most of my 7th period is in my 5th class right now.

R: So there is some similarity between your 7th period and your 5th period?

Mika: I always count in my head how many people are in my next class. Like in my first period, I have this girl that is in my 6th period and another kid that is in my 5th period. And that's it. Oh, and another girl.

Bruce: Ya know, you have to be there friends to help you out. Like ask them what test did we do and all this. You can use that as an advantage sometimes.

R: So you mean, having kids in the same class in multiple classes you can use as an advantage?

Bruce: Yes.

Caitlyn: You can go over homework in one class and copy notes.

Mika: Like me and his brother, we were in the Keystone class last semester which was 5th period and we had 6th period together. So, whenever we needed help for 5th period, we would give it to each other in 6th period.

APPENDIX G DOMAIN SHEET

Example:

1. Cover Term (Domain)
 - a. Included Term
 - i. Categories within Included Term
1. Sense of Belonging to School Community
 - a. Establishing Connections Early
 - i. Feeder Middle School(s)
 - ii. Summer Camp
 - iii. Parent Night
 - iv. Open Houses
 - v. Freshman Orientation
 - b. Staying Connected
 - i. Intense Focus on the First Weeks of School
 - ii. Uniting Freshmen
2. Supportive & Collaborative Learning Environment
 - a. Teacher to Teacher Communication
 - b. Teacher Support Network
 - c. Student-Centered Talk
 - d. Student Support Programs
 - i. Keystone as Advisory
 - ii. Peer Mentors
3. Freshman-Focused Teaching & Learning
 - a. Freshman Transition Course
 - b. Continuity Between Classes
 - c. Students Helping Students
 - d. Celebrating Success
 - i. Academic & Behavioral Incentives
 - ii. "Eagle Mall"
 - iii. Honor Roll
 - e. Academic Support Programs
 - i. Peer Tutoring
 - ii. Cougar Time
 - iii. VLT
4. Culture of Commitment to Ninth Grade Success
 - a. Complete Buy-in and Support
 - i. Administration
 - ii. Teachers
 - iii. Students
 - b. Selecting the Right Personnel
 - c. Professional Development
 - d. Outside Influences
 - i. Class Size Reduction Amendment
 - ii. School District Mandates
 - e. Small Learning Community Grant

APPENDIX H PERSONAL ASSUMPTIONS

Qualitative research is subjective as the researcher applies his/her knowledge and experiences to better understand the participants and the data collected (Hatch, 2002). Therefore, in all qualitative research it is imperative to state clearly the researcher's subjectivity. The following paragraphs elaborate on my educational background, experiences, and beliefs in an attempt to help the reader understand how this study and its findings were situated in her ideas on developmentally appropriate secondary education school environments. Her following beliefs inevitably shaped the research.

I earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in social science education and psychology and a Master of Education degree in social studies education. For three years she was a high school teacher in a large, diverse high school in the school district selected for this study. She taught both ninth grade and multi-grade social science classes. As a result of teaching freshmen in both single-grade and multi-grade classes, I noticed a mismatch between the needs of entering ninth graders and the organizational structure of high schools. Students seemed lost, often reporting having problems adapting to high school life. Many students earned poor grades during the first nine week grading period. Few students got involved in extracurricular activities and school clubs. She firmly believed that there was a developmental mismatch between the organizational structure of traditional high schools and the needs of middle adolescents.

Additionally, I completed course work for a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in curriculum, teaching, and teacher education. During my doctoral program, I intensively studied grades 6-10 education with a great deal of time spent on trying to understand how school transitions affected students. I published an article entitled, "Movin' on up: The Transition to Middle School" in the *Florida League of Middle School Journal* and wrote an

extensive research report entitled, “The Transition In and Out of the Middle Grades” for the Helios Education Foundation. She also presented at both national and state conferences on school transitions. Finally, I served as a consultant to one large, urban high school wishing to improve the transition into their school.

Table C-1. Data Management Log

Date	Participant	Data Source	Duration in Minutes
4-20-07	Mrs. Prado	School District Interview	57
4-23-07	Mr. Bandery	School A Site-based SLC Coordinator Interview 1	16
4-23-07	Dr. Ramell, Mr. Bandery, & Mrs. Cartright	School A Leadership Focus Group	49
4-24-07	Mr. Brommel, Mr. Hanes, & Dr. Hawthaway	School B Leadership Focus Group	68
4-25-07	Mrs. Matingly & Mr. Broadway	School C Leadership Focus Group	84
4-26-07	Mrs. Hillington	School C Site-based SLC Coordinator Interview 1	69
4-26-07	Mrs. Hillington	School C Site-based SLC Coordinator Interview 2	40
4-27-07	Mrs. Smith, Mr. Cruz, Ms. Simons, & Ms. Kantry	School B Teacher Focus Group	24
4-30-07	Mrs. Cartright	School A Classroom Observation	90
4-30-07	Ms. Potter	School A Classroom Observation	45
4-30-07	Mrs. Landry	School A Classroom Observation	45
4-30-07	Mr. Coones	School A Classroom Observation	45
5-1-07	Mrs. Franks	School C Classroom Observation	50
5-1-07	Mr. Hubert	School C Classroom Observation	50
5-1-07	Mrs. Honors	School C Classroom Observation	50
5-1-07	Mrs. Matingly	School C Classroom Observation	50
5-2-07	Ms. Froth	School B Classroom Observation	50
5-2-07	Mrs. Kuhn	School B Classroom Observation	50
5-2-07	Mrs. Matters	School B Classroom Observation	50
5-2-07	Mr. Daud	School B Classroom Observation	50
5-2-07	Mr. Benard	School B Classroom Observation	50
5-2-07	Mr. Benard	School B Freshman Lead Interview	25
5-3-07	Mr. Bandery	School A Site-based SLC Coordinator Interview 2	73
5-3-07	Mr. Cunningham & Mrs. Cartright	School A Teacher Focus Group	24
5-3-07	Mrs. Cartright	School A Freshman Lead Interview	25
5-3-07	Ms. Potter, Mrs. French & Ms. Kenny	School A Teacher Focus Group	34
5-7-07	Mel, Sheryl, Carey, Elena, Ramon, Kody, KT, Andy, & Eric	School C Student Focus Group	55
5-7-07	Mr. George, Mr. Jettings, & Mr. Hubert	School C Teacher Focus Group	45
5-7-07	Mr. Kurts, Mrs. Honors, & Miss Appleton	School C Teacher Focus Group	30
5-7-07	Mrs. Wilkinson	School C Freshman Lead Interview	72

Table C-1 (cont'd). Data Management Log

5-8-07	Mrs. Samson & Mr. Wren	School C Classroom Observation	25
5-8-07	Mr. Landry	School C Classroom Observation	25
5-8-07	Mr. Jettings	School C Classroom Observation	50
5-8-07	Mr. Broadway	School C Site-based Administrator Interview	37
5-8-07	Ms. Bing & Mr. Wren	School C Classroom Observation	50
5-8-07	Ms. Nottings	School B Site-based SLC Coordinator Interview 1	84
5-9-07	Mrs. Rice	School B Classroom Observation	50
5-9-07	Mika, Cameron, & Bruce	School B Student Focus Group	38
5-9-07	Mr. Price	School B Classroom Observation	50
5-10-07	Mr. Cunningham	School A Classroom Observation	45
5-10-07	Darren, Monica, Evan, Silvia, Samantha, Brigitte, Jesse, Katie, & Kori	School A Student Focus Group	50
5-10-07	Mr. Ford	School A Classroom Observation	45
5-10-07	Mrs. Mauch	School A Site-based Administrator Interview	34
5-11-07	Mrs. Rice, Ms. Froth, Mr. Quarte, & Mrs. Porter	School B Teacher Focus Group	17
5-11-07	Mr. Price & Mr. Daudry	School B Teacher Focus Group	13
5-11-07	Mr. Brommel	School B Site-based Administrator Interview	20
5-11-07	Mrs. Smith	School B Classroom Observation	50

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Cheryl Rose Kmiec was born in Albany, New York, January 5, 1979. She began her education at a small, private Christian school in Alcove, New York. During her middle school years, Cheryl attended school in New York for the first half of the school year and attended school in Florida for the second half of the year. Cheryl graduated in 1996 from Lemon Bay High School in Englewood, Florida. She attended Florida Southern College double majoring in psychology and social science education. After graduating from Florida Southern, Cheryl attended the University of Florida where she earned a master's degree in social studies education in December 2000. Cheryl continued her studies at the University of Florida until she acquired her first teaching position as a secondary social studies educator at Braulio Alonso High School in Hillsborough County in July 2001. Cheryl taught psychology, advanced placement psychology, geography, and American government at Alonso High School for three years. During her time at Alonso, she enjoyed coaching and sponsoring various classes and clubs. In June 2003, Cheryl married Jayson Kmiec, her longtime sweetheart.

In 2004, Cheryl left Alonso High School and returned to the University of Florida to continue work on her doctorate degree in curriculum and instruction along with a second master's degree in educational psychology. While at the University of Florida, Cheryl was involved in a number of projects. She conducted research for the Helios Education Foundation, consulted with various middle schools around the state, presented at numerous state, national, and international conferences, published in both state and national journals, supervised social studies interns, and taught many different graduate level courses.

Her interests include helping to prepare pre-service educators to work with twenty-first century adolescents and working with schools that wish to reorganize. She is deeply committed to researching school transitions, secondary school organization, and social studies best

practices. Cheryl is a member of the National Middle School Association, National Council for the Social Studies, College University Faculty Assembly, Florida League of Middle Schools, Florida Council for the Social Studies, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, American Educational Research Association, and Phi Delta Kappa.

Cheryl's future research aspirations are to continue working with middle and high schools to improve the middle to high school transition and freshman experience.