Supporting Transition of At-Risk Students Through a Freshman Orientation Model

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Abstract: *This study examines the issues surrounding middle school students' transitions to high school and the degree to which freshman orientation models can help them. The attendance, discipline, report card grades, and end-of-course exams of 60 students who participated in a freshman orientation were compared to those of 150 students who were invited to participate in the program but did not. Students who participated experienced gains in science end-of-course state exams; increases in math, science, and English course grades; and positive changes in discipline and attendance data. Parents of program participants shared that, overall, the program helped their children make a smooth transition to high school.*

Researchers have referred to the freshman year of high school as precarious, awkward, and even pivotal (Ascher, 1987; Black, 2004; Donegan, 2008; Willens, 2013). The transition from middle school to high school for any student can be extremely difficult, but it poses even bigger challenges for at-risk students (Ascher, 1987; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Transitioning students from eighth- to ninth-grade requires that middle and high schools work together on initiatives to prepare students for high school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Williamston, 2010). It is especially important to provide support for students at risk for academic failure (Dorman, 2012).

The need for ninth-grade transition programs has received increased attention in recent years (Frank, 2011; Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Students who participate in transition programs are better prepared for the challenges of high school (Steele, 2010; Sutton, 2009). A collaborative effort on the part of administrators, teachers, and parents is necessary to address students' needs as they make the transition to high school (Dorman, 2012; Education Partnerships, Inc., 2012; Frank, 2011; Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). According to Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg (2008), adverse effects of challenging school transitions include retention, placement in remedial courses, and dropping out.

The freshman year transition to high school is vitally important to students' success throughout their high school career. Ninth-grade students who experience academic and social issues are more likely to drop out (Sims, 2010). Effective programs must offer a myriad of best practices that address academic, social, and procedural challenges for all students (Akos, 2004; Ascher, 1987; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Dorman, 2012; Smith, 1997). Comprehensive transition programs that include numerous activities geared toward the concerns and needs of students, parents, and teachers can be effective in helping at-risk students transition to the ninth grade. Effective transition programs improve attendance, achievement, and retention among students (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Such programs can help students transition to a new school with less anxiety and more academic success. School administrators can ease transitions by facilitating programs that address student and family needs and by supporting communication attempts between middle and high school faculty and staff members (Education Partnerships, Inc., 2012).

Researchers in the area of transition have proposed that communication and solid research are needed to ensure that educators are providing the best resources to help students succeed (Akos, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Benner and Graham (2009) and Isakson and Jarvis (1999) indicated that transition from middle school to high school is a year-long process. Few studies have incorporated a parent perspective or reviewed student end-of-course (EOC) exams, grades, attendance, and discipline data in an attempt to determine whether there were cause-effect relationships among the variables.

A quantitative, causal-comparative design was used to examine On the Block, a freshman transition program that focuses on providing students with knowledge about high school prior to their first day attending high school. Qualitative data were obtained from responses of participants' parents to open-ended survey questions. Goals of the research included adding to the body of knowledge on transition practices and providing the school district with information regarding the impact of the On the Block (OTB) transition program.

Background Literature

Educators, parents, community members, and healthcare professionals identify a person as *at risk* if he or she may be in need of interventions to help him or her cope with the transition into a new environment. According to Balfanz (2011), the three key indicators of student success are attendance, behavior, and course failure. The Texas Education Agency lists 13 criteria (TEA, 2011) to use to identify at-risk students. Students from low-income families who are coded with one of these indicators typically have a 25% chance, at best, of graduating from high school (Balfanz, 2011). Approximately 80% of eventual dropouts display distress signs in one of these 13 areas during grades six to nine (Balfanz, 2011).

Secondary educators are essential to helping students at risk for dropping out (Akos, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Decreasing the number of students who drop out necessitates being attentive to high school transitions (Neild et al., 2008). According to Neild et al. (2008), dropout rates

cannot be improved if students are not provided assistance with high school transitions. Teachers hold students accountable by providing constructive feedback, refusing to accept halfhearted efforts, providing assistance when needed, and refusing to give up on students (Stipek, 2006). Strong communication efforts can build mutual trust between families and schools (Bardwell, 2011; Meier, 2002). To lessen the stress associated with transitions, middle school staff should start preparing students for transition around sixth grade.

High School Transition Practices

The transition from middle school to high school can be a pivotal time that requires students to traverse settings that are larger and less welcoming that those they experienced in middle school (Black, 2004). This transition creates a stopping point for freshman known as the "ninth-grade bulge," where almost 25% of students are held for another year (Black, 2004, p. 43). The freshman year experience for students can be a predictor as to whether or not a student will stay in high school and graduate (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

Several strategies and programs have emerged over the last few decades to address this growing epidemic of how to support freshman transitions (Sims, 2010); some high schools utilize freshman academies to create smaller learning communities to ease ninth-grade transition, while others utilize orientation meetings, school redesign, and special courses to support students during this time (Reents, 2002; Sims, 2010). Another strategy that is widely used to help students transition to high school and feel more connected as high school freshmen is to break down a large high school into smaller groups (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Reents, 2002). Smaller groups allow students to receive special attention, build relationships, and decrease alienation. While it can be beneficial to put students into smaller groups, it is also important to provide them with effective teachers (Donegan, 2008; Pellicer, 2003).

The preparation process for students who are entering high school should be accompanied by special programs that orient students and parents to the school. Providing an orientation allows parents and students to become familiar with procedures and rules and to feel as though they are part of the school culture (Bardwell, 2011). Ascher (1987) suggested several orientation practices used to smooth the passage from eighth grade to high school. The practices included: (a) afterschool activities, (b) small group visits, (c) shadowing, and (d) orientation programs. These practices can be used alone or in conjunction with one another to provide support to at-risk students and their parents (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Student Perceptions of the Transition to Ninth Grade

Mizelle and Irvin (2000) posited that one of the fundamental goals of any middle school should be to present support to students and to help them make a successful transition. Despite the need identified throughout the literature to support students during transition, some schools have not been able to help make the transition to high school a smooth passage (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). For example, according to Smith-Maddox and Wheelock (1995), many disadvantaged students, particularly those in high-poverty school districts, are not always aware that courses taken in high school are critical to their future opportunities. Reversing this situation requires support and guidance from counselors and teachers (Smith-Maddox & Wheelock, 1995).

Students have noted concerns about transitioning to high school as freshmen. Some appear to be concerned about getting lost, interacting with older students and bullies, understanding the school rules, making new friends, successfully opening lockers, and having too much homework (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Beresford (2013) found that students were most concerned about academic success. Parents and teachers can influence student perceptions of high school; however, parents and siblings may communicate warnings to students that contain sensationalized information (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

Parent Perceptions of the Transition to Ninth Grade

Educational transitions present challenges and opportunities for students, parents, teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). The freshman transition is a time that is associated with achievement loss (Smith, 2006; Smith, Feldwisch, & Abell, 2006). Smith et al. (2006) found that, in general, students and parents were excited about the opportunities available in the high school setting.

Parents need access to accurate information regarding the organizational and academic changes their children are likely to encounter as they enter the ninth grade (Dorman, 2012; Education Partnerships, Inc., 2012). It is not possible for parents or school staff members to describe and prepare students for all the changes and experiences they will face in high school, but it is possible to improve students' chances of success by providing research-based transition programs and orientations to students who are entering their freshman year of high school and to their parents (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Smith, 2006).

On the Block

On the Block (OTB) is an orientation and intervention program that begins in middle school and continues through students' freshman year to help prepare students for the high school transition. An aim of the program is to help students build relationships with adults at the high school level. Middle schools and high schools work together to plan activities, invite parents and students to informational meetings, and target at-risk students to attend the program.

On the Block is an invitation only, fast-paced preview of high school. High school at-risk counselors facilitate the program. School staff members identify students to participate in the program using at least one of the 13 at-risk criteria listed by the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2011). Statutory criteria for at-risk status include a student who is under 21 years of age and who:

1. was not advanced from one grade level to the next for one or more school years;
2. is in grades 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12 and did not maintain an average equivalent to 70 on a scale of 100 in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum during a semester in the preceding or current school year or is not maintaining such an average in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum in the current semester;
3. did not perform satisfactorily on an assessment instrument administered to the student under TEC [Texas Education Code] Subchapter B, Chapter 39, and who has not in the previous or current school year subsequently performed on that instrument or another appropriate instrument at a level equal to at least 110% of the level of satisfactory performance on that instrument;
4. is in prekindergarten, kindergarten, or grades 1, 2, or 3 and did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness test or assessment instrument administered during the current school year;
5. is pregnant or is a parent;
6. was placed in an alternative education program in accordance with §TEC 37.006 during the preceding or current school year;
7. was expelled in accordance with §TEC 37.007 during the preceding or current school year;
8. is currently on parole, probation, deferred prosecution, or other conditional release;
9. was previously reported through the PEIMS [Public Education Information Management System] to have dropped out of school;
10. is a student of limited English proficiency, as defined by §TEC 29.052;
11. is in the custody or care of the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services or was, during the current school year, referred to the department by a school official, officer of the juvenile court, or law enforcement official;
12. is homeless, as defined by 42 U.S.C. Section 11302 and its subsequent amendments; or
13. resided in the preceding school year or resides in the current school year in a residential placement facility in the district, including a detention facility, substance abuse treatment facility, emergency shelter, psychiatric hospital, halfway house, or foster group home. (TEA, 2011)

An informational meeting to inform parents and students about the program is held at the end of the school year preceding the summer that students are scheduled to attend On the Block. At the meeting, district personnel share information with parents and students about transitioning to high school and encourage program participation.

Students who participate in On the Block receive one-half of a local credit for attending a two-week orientation the summer before freshman year, Monday through Thursday, 8:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Participation in OTB serves as a student's first opportunity to experience a block schedule, eat lunch in the cafeteria, and attend high school classes. The goal is to show students what a typical day might be like so that students can be better prepared, feel more comfortable, and build relationships before the first day of high school.

Participating students are exposed to the campus layout prior to the first day of school and are taught how to open a locker. Other information items shared include cafeteria procedures, how grade-point averages are determined, and how to get involved in extracurricular activities. The students find out class schedules and locations and experience a 90-minute class period, a new experience for freshman students because the district's middle schools utilize 45-minute class periods. To culminate the summer session, each high school invites its respective band, athletic team members, and teachers to interact with the OTB students in a celebration similar to a pep rally.

Research Questions

The primary purpose of this study was to determine if On the Block made an impact on students who participated in the program. The study included an examination of student attendance, discipline, report card grades, and EOC exams between students who participated in OTB and those who did not participate. Parents provided perceptions about OTB via survey responses. Data were used to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a difference between OTB students and non-OTB students on end-of-course exams, grades, attendance, and discipline?
2. How do parents of OTB students perceive the value of the orientation program?

Method of Procedure

The student participants in this study were selected from a large Texas suburban school district and chosen based on their participation in the On the Block transition program during the summer of 2011. The particular large suburban school district involved in this study was selected for two reasons: (a) its accessibility to the investigator, and (b) the OTB program being studied was unique to this district. A preexisting treatment group was comprised of 60 students from three of the district's high schools who had participated in the OTB program during the 2011-2012 school year. The group of students who participated in OTB was compared to a group of students who did not participate. The non-OTB group included 150 students (50 from each campus) from the same three high schools as the students who participated in OTB. The adults who participated in the survey were the parents of students who attended OTB.

The first research question examined passing/failing grades for student end-of-course exams, report card grades, attendance, and discipline. The question was answered by analyzing individual student data from the district's student

information systems. Data were tabulated and analyzed using SPSS 18.0, a statistical software package for the social sciences. Individual student data between On the Block students and non-On the Block students were analyzed using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs). The independent variable was the group status for the OTB program. Dependent variables for each ANOVA were the outcomes of attendance, discipline, report card grades, and EOC exams. Statistical tests determined whether a relationship existed between the independent variable at a .05 alpha level.

To answer the second research question, 60 parents of students who attended the On the Block transition program were mailed a researcher-created survey to solicit their perceptions of how the OTB program impacted their children's successes during their freshman year. Parents were asked specific questions regarding whether the OTB program helped their children feel more comfortable the first day of school, understand the expectations of high school, build relationships with teachers and staff, and navigate the school building. The open-ended response data were organized and coded to determine whether themes existed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Findings

The On the Block program provided students with eight days of mock lessons in math and science, technology training, and a review of procedural items to help students understand the differences between middle school and high school. OTB also offered students an opportunity to get to know faculty members, administrators, and other students before the school year started so that students would feel more prepared during the first weeks of their freshman year.

Research Question 1

The first research question investigated the passing/failing grades for student end-of-course exams, report card grades, attendance, and discipline. The independent variable was the group status for the On the Block program (experimental or control). Dependent variables for each ANOVA were the outcomes of end-of-course exams, report card grades, attendance, and discipline.

End-of-course exams. One-way analyses of variance were conducted to evaluate the differences in end-of-course exams for the core subjects of math, science, social studies, and English. The independent variable was program status (On the Block or non-On the Block) and the dependent variable was EOC exam score (see Table 1). All exam results were collected for both the OTB students and the non-OTB control group.

The minimum percent correct required for students to pass the Algebra I (math) EOC exam was 37%. A greater percentage of On the Block students passed the math EOC (86%); however, a one-way ANOVA showed that the difference in math end-of-course exam scores between the OTB group (M = 52.04, SD = 15.33) and the non-OTB group (M = 46.77, SD = 16.42) was not statistically significant, $F(1,167) = 3.81$, $p = .053$, $\eta^2 = .022$. The minimum percent correct required for students to pass the Biology (science) EOC exam was 37%. For science, a greater percentage of OTB students passed (84%). A one-way ANOVA showed that the difference in science end-of-course exam scores between the OTB group (M = 50.60, SD = 14.13) and the non-OTB group (M = 45.56, SD = 13.37) was statistically significant, $F(1,182) = 5.34$, $p = .021$, $\eta^2 = .029$.

The minimum percent correct required for students to pass the World Geography (social studies) EOC exam was 46%. For social studies, a greater percentage of On the Block students passed (70%); however, a one-way ANOVA showed that the difference in social studies end-of-course exam scores between the OTB group (M = 52.96, SD = 14.25) and the non-OTB group (M = 48.67, SD = 14.81) was not statistically significant, $F(1,181) = 3.37$, $p = .068$, $\eta^2 = .018$. The minimum percent correct required for students to pass the English I Reading (English) EOC exam was 54%. For English, a greater percentage of OTB students passed (45%); however, a one-way ANOVA showed that the difference in English end-of-course exam scores between

Table 1

EOC Exam Means and Standard Deviations for the 150 Non-OTB and 60 OTB Students

	Non-On the Block			On the Block		
Subject	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*N*	*M*	*SD*
Math	117	46.8	16.4	51	52.0	15.3
Science*	126	45.6	13.4	57	50.6	14.1
Social Studies	125	48.7	14.8	57	53.0	14.3
English	123	49.1	13.3	58	51.6	15.0

Note: An asterisk (*) denotes statistical significance at the .05 level.

the OTB group (M = 51.64, *SD* = 14.98) and the non-On the Block group (M = 49.07, *SD* = 13.28) was not statistically significant, $F(1,180) = 1.35$, $p = .246$, $\eta^2 = .008$.

Report card grades. One-way analyses of variance were conducted to evaluate the difference in report card grades for the core subjects of math, science, social studies, and English. The independent variable was the program status of treatment (On the Block or non-On the Block) and the dependent variable was the report card grade (see Table 2). Students who received the OTB intervention showed significant gains in grade point averages in the areas of math, science, and English.

A one-way ANOVA showed that the difference in math report card grades between the On the Block group (M = 78.53, *SD* = 7.71) and the non-On the Block group (M = 74.57, *SD* = 9.62) was statistically significant, $F(1,196) = 7.80$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .038$. The difference in science report card grades between the OTB group (M = 79.47, *SD* = 8.22) and the non-OTB group (M = 74.94, *SD* = 9.86) was statistically significant, $F(1,196) = 9.61$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .047$. A one-way ANOVA showed that the difference in English report card grades between the OTB group (M = 80.60, *SD* = 7.87) and the non-OTB group (M = 76.14, *SD* = 9.86) was statistically significant, $F(1, 197) = 9.59$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .047$.

The one report card subject area where there was no significant gain was in social studies. A one-way ANOVA showed that the difference in social studies report card grades between the On the Block group (M = 78.73, *SD* = 10.01) and the non-On the Block group (M = 76.45, *SD* = 9.12) was not statistically significant, $F(1,196) = 2.43$, $p = .121$, $\eta^2 = .012$.

Attendance and discipline. Students who participated in On the Block had fewer office referrals and fewer absences (see Table 3). The OTB group had 2.15 fewer office referrals than the non-OTB group. A one-way ANOVA showed that the difference in office referrals between the OTB group (M = 2.27, *SD* = 4.51) and the non-OTB group (M = 4.42, *SD* = 6.99) was statistically significant, $F(1,205) = 4.73$, $p = .031$, $\eta^2 = .023$. For attendance, the OTB group missed an average of 2 fewer days in the school year than the non-OTB group. The difference in attendance between the OTB group (M = 3.52, *SD* = 4.17) and the non-OTB group (M = 5.57, *SD* = 6.80) was statistically significant, $F(1,205) = 4.84$, $p = .029$, $\eta^2 = .023$.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations for Grades by Treatment for the 150 Non-OTB, 60 OTB Students

	Non-On the Block			On the Block		
Subject	*N*	M	*SD*	*N*	M	*SD*
Math*	138	74.6	9.6	59	78.5	7.7
Science*	138	74.9	9.9	59	79.5	8.2
Social Studies	138	76.5	9.1	59	78.7	10.0
English*	138	76.1	9.9	60	80.6	7.9

Note: An asterisk (*) denotes statistical significance at the .05 level.

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations for Attendance, Discipline for the 150 Non-OTB, 60 OTB Students

	Non-On the Block			On the Block		
Criterion	*N*	M	*SD*	*N*	M	*SD*
Discipline*	146	4.4	7.0	60	2.3	4.5
Attendance*	146	5.6	6.8	60	3.5	4.2

Note: An asterisk (*) denotes statistical significance at the .05 level.

Research Question 2

The second research question was used to examine the perceptions of the parents of On the Block students. A total of 33 out of 60 parents responded. The parents shared very few recommendations for program changes. Parents reported that they believed that the program helped their children make the transition to high school. The parents felt that program participation gave their children advantages of knowing where things in the high school were located and how to find classes on the first day of school.

When asked if the On the Block transition program was a positive experience for their children, parents responded that the program was "wonderful and very beneficial" and a "big help" to their children. Several parents shared that they felt that the program helped ease some of their children's fears about starting a new school.

Common themes that emerged included: (a) appreciation to staff for program implementation, (b) need for program continuation, and (c) accentuation of the program's success. Parents were asked to list any suggestions or comments they had for the On the Block program in the future. Their recommendations included:

1. I would like to continue these programs in the summer.
2. The program was too short; more meetings need to be included once school starts… maybe like an afterschool program.
3. More kids from different schools should get to participate.

Of the 33 respondents, three parents made comments that pertained to adding to or adjusting the program.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Researchers have indicated that the transition from middle to high school is difficult for any student, but especially for at-risk youth (Reents, 2002). Educators in the 21st century must focus on creating better programs and supports that will enable more at-risk youth to be successful in high school (Baker, 2008). Research conducted by Astbury (2010) emphasized the need to review student data sources such as grades, attendance, discipline, and test scores to assess the impact of programs like On the Block. Such evidence of student success or difficulty is valuable when assessing whether a transition program has provided support to students. Researchers refer to attendance, behavior, and course failure as key indicators of success (Balfanz, 2011; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

The results of this study focused on key indicators to determine whether or not the program was a success. Significant differences existed between students who attended the On the Block transition program and those who did not for one end-of-course exam, science, and for report card grades in math, science, and English. There also was a significant difference in absences and office referrals between students who participated in the OTB program and those who did not.

Researchers have offered some understanding as to why students who participated in On the Block experienced significant gains in grades, increased attendance, and decreased discipline referrals (Copeland, 2006; Dean, 2011; Jones, 2007; Little, 2010). The OTB transition program provided students the opportunity to build strong relationships with staff and students before school started. Relationships with teachers are what motivate students to work hard and seek the support they need (Frank, 2011; Knesting, 2008; Milliken, 2007; Popadiuk & Oliver, 2001; Smith, 2007; Stipek, 2006).

The results of this study confirmed results and recommendations from previous studies that have been conducted in the area of freshman transition. Steele (2010) suggested that, especially during the ninth-grade year, students need the support of well designed transition programs that address academic, social, and emotional needs. Straksis (2010) revealed similar findings in a study conducted in a large school district. Significant effects have been observed that link positive perceptions of a highly structured transition program to an increase in grade point averages and a reduction in failures (Straksis, 2010).

Parents displayed positive perceptions about the program and responded in ways that indicated that the program was a support for their children. These types of data are instrumental in developing a program that can meet the needs of struggling parents during times of transition (Astbury, 2010). Parents need access to accurate information to prepare students for transition to high school and to provide the support needed to navigate through this difficult time (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). Researchers have posited that parents are an important resource to help students experience success and that parents should be provided with research-based transition programs and orientations to support students (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Smith, 2006).

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research should include pretests and posttests for students entering high school and for their parents. Gaining feedback before program implementation and after program completion can help measure whether the program met the needs of the students and the parents. Parent perceptions were the only perceptions identified in this study; future studies could examine the perceptions of students and teachers.

Research pertaining to the connection between relationships and freshman transition practices needs to be conducted. Relationships are mentioned throughout the research as a factor that impacts student success (Frank, 2011; Knesting, 2008; Milliken, 2007; Popadiuk & Oliver, 2001; Smith, 2007; Stipek, 2006). The number of at-risk youth in the United States is increasing, and this increase is affecting the way schools operate (Baker, 2008). The strategies and characteristics of these programs need to be shared with school districts' leaders so that that they can work to implement effective transition programs for all students.

Summary

A collaborative effort on the part of administrators, teachers, and parents is necessary to address students' needs as students transition to high school (Akos, 2004; Ascher, 2006; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Smith, 1997). As the educational community evaluates its practices with regard to students transitioning from middle school to high school, it is imperative that educators and administrators recognize that it requires everyone working together to attempt to meet the individual needs of all students (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001).

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