

SUPPORTIVE CONDITIONS FOR THE SUCCESSFUL DEVELOPMENT OF
NINTH-GRADE CENTERS

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The transition from middle school to high school can be challenging for some students. Many school districts are implementing practices to ease the transition to high school. The current study examined one school district's practices and procedures for the development and implementation of a ninth-grade center. In this study, I examined the perceptions of 12 participants (teachers, counselors, and campus and district administrators) in a suburban Texas school district with a ninth-grade center. Using a qualitative descriptive case study methodology, data were collected and analyzed from face-to-face in-depth interviews and a focus group. The findings revealed an overall positive view of ninth-grade centers and a generally favorable impression of separating ninth graders from the remainder of the high school student body, to focus specifically on ninth graders' unique and individual needs. There were some identified concerns related to communication and logistical issues between the ninth-grade center and the main high school campus. From participant feedback, effective campus leadership, providing engaging and ongoing professional learning, having a separate facility, and creating a sense of team through building strong relationships are the specific top four elements that are most effective in developing a ninth-grade center. While this study provides a practical set of recommendations for school districts to guide the development and implementation of a ninth-grade center, expanded research is necessary to confirm the long-range impact on student achievement.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The transition from middle school to high school can be difficult for some students. As they enter high school, ninth graders, tasked with the goal of successfully navigating a new environment, are juggling more rigorous courses and facing social and emotional challenges as they work toward the ultimate goal of high school graduation. Most traditional high schools consist of grades nine through twelve (McIntosh & White, 2006). The ninth-grade year creates the foundation of the entire high school experience. Ninth graders who have a successful transition to high school are more likely to graduate on time and be accepted to college than those who experienced failure at some point during their first year of high school (Roderick, Kelley-Kemple, Johnson & Beechum, 2014). Over the last few decades, school administrators have worked toward finding viable solutions to assist ninth graders in achieving a smooth transition from middle school to high school; however, the ninth-grade year remains a challenge.

The retention and dropout rate for ninth grade is the highest of all the high school grades (McIntosh & White, 2006). In addition, truancy, suspension, and course failure rates for ninth graders are higher than any other high school grade level (Smith, J., Akos, P., Sungtaek, L. & Wiley, S., 2018). The failure to graduate from high school and receive a diploma often translates into low-paying jobs, unemployment, poor health, and poverty (Furger, 2008). The median annual income for a male high school dropout in 2015 was \$25,000, compared to \$30,500 for a high school graduate and \$50,000 for a college graduate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

The high school dropout rate is such a challenge faced by school administrators that it received national attention through a variety of federal programs. First, the 1965 Elementary and

Secondary Education Act (ESEA), under President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration, was introduced to address the achievement gap and provide federal funding to both primary and secondary educational programming that included instructional resources and professional development for teachers (Roy & Mishel, 2018). ESEA was to be reauthorized every five years since its enactment; however, some presidents did not accomplish this reauthorization requirement. The reauthorization during President George W. Bush's administration was known as the No Child Left Behind Act and included the Dropout Prevention Act (NCLB, 2002).

Embedded in this federal law is the following statement:

The purpose of this part is to provide school dropout prevention and reentry and to raise academic achievement levels by providing grants that (1) challenge all children to attain their highest academic potential; and (2) ensure that all students have substantial and ongoing opportunities to attain their highest academic potential through school wide programs proven effective in school dropout prevention and reentry. (www.ed.gov, Section H)

In December 2015, another reauthorization of the ESEA was signed into law by President Barack Obama (Roy & Mishel, 2018). The new legislation, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), continues to place school improvement as a top priority for the American government. These improvements include a focus on reducing the failure rate of ninth graders and increasing the high school graduation rate.

Since the ninth grade is such a pivotal year for students, it is imperative that students experience success during their first year of high school in order to meet graduation requirements and graduate with their peer group (McIntosh & White, 2006). In contrast, if success is not experienced during the first year of high school, students are more likely to drop out of school. Overall, the ninth-grade year can be marked with negative experiences as the change from middle school to high school includes greater obstacles, such as a more rigorous and challenging course load. Students have concerns about class rank and maintaining a strong grade point

average, and they feel pressured to meet graduation requirements (Benner & Graham, 2007). The social pressures to graduate from high school and be fully prepared for college can be overwhelming to ninth graders as well. To decrease the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate, some school districts are creating ninth-grade centers to ease the issues associated with the transition to high school and better meet their students' needs.

Statement of the Problem

Research has shown that the ninth-grade year of high school is the most challenging and significant year of the entire high school experience. Thus, the problem of practice for this study was to examine the structures and systems that are necessary for creating a successful ninth-grade center to assure student success in this transitional academic year. School districts have faced challenges with the ninth-grade transition and are searching for ways to improve the transition from middle school to high school. The ninth-grade year sets the entire course of a student's high school experience. Because of the importance of a high school diploma, it is essential that students are supported during their high school years to assure they succeed to graduation. The transition from middle school to high school has been cited as a critical event and an important factor in students' high school experience, particularly considering their need to demonstrate academic achievement (Kelly, 2013). In addition to academics, this transition is one that affects students emotionally. They must navigate the "daunting task in overcoming the social, emotional, physical and intellectual challenges" and, as a result, may "feel overwhelmed, confused, and alone at the high school level" (Cook, Fowler & Harris, 2008, p. 2).

Students typically transition from a smaller middle school campus to a larger high school campus. Not only do they have to brave more course offerings, including more rigorous and challenging courses, they must also negotiate unfamiliar territory in terms of the number of

students who populate the school. Most traditional high schools have a physically larger space than middle schools, creating additional obstacles for ninth graders to navigate as they maneuver much larger physical spaces on the high school campus (McIntosh & White, 2006). Traditional high schools also have more staff and a higher student enrollment; often, these staff members lack the appropriate training or experience to specifically meet the unique needs of ninth-grade students.

Additional challenges exist for students who enter high school academically below grade level. At times, ninth graders can feel alone and alienated in a large high school (McIntosh & White, 2006). Many secondary certified teachers are not adequately prepared to teach the basic numeracy and literacy skills necessary to reduce the achievement gap (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Some high schools follow an established teacher status system that regulates the assignment of ninth-grade entry-level courses, such as English I and Algebra I, to the least experienced teachers (Neild, 2009). In some cases, these teachers may be new to the teaching field or may have been newly assigned to the school. In other cases, they may not possess the appropriate certification in the content area they are teaching (Neild & Farley, 2005).

Some teacher preparation programs may not provide adequate training or exposure to the complexities and realities inherent in a ninth-grader's ability to make the move from middle school to high school. This lack of teacher training and ability to respond to the variable needs of this student population can add to the difficulty ninth graders experience when transitioning to high school. On the other hand, providing the appropriate training and adequate resources to support teachers' ability to better meet the social and emotional needs of freshmen can benefit a teacher's overall experience at the ninth-grade campus and contribute to the likelihood that

students may enjoy school and learn in a more supportive environment (McIntosh & White, 2006).

School districts are striving to identify and implement the supportive conditions needed in creating a ninth-grade campus. In order to create a more personalized high school experience where students are in an environment of 500 or less students, the U.S. Department of Education (2008) responded to oversized high schools with the implementation of small learning communities (SLCs). These smaller configurations enabled teachers to develop personal relationships with their students and better understand students' academic needs. The small groups also helped to make students feel more connected to their peer group and the high school in general (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Some districts approached this transition differently by creating separate learning spaces for their ninth graders, housing them in a ninth-grade center or campus to better meet the students' unique academic and emotional needs. Nevertheless, many school districts do not possess a thorough understanding of the process used to design and implement a successful ninth-grade center or campus. As a result, campus and district leaders continue to struggle to implement meaningful school reforms that significantly impact student achievement (Fullan, 2011). To address this need, it is important to identify the challenges associated with students' transition from middle school to high school. This identification may provide administrative staff with data to assist them with the implementation of a ninth-grade center to support students' smooth transition from middle school to high school.

Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this qualitative descriptive case study were to explore and understand the processes, supports, and practices used by district and campus administrators and staff to create a ninth-grade center and to examine the effect on student success in the ninth-grade center. To

accomplish this purpose, I examined key broad components described in the conceptual framework. These components included teacher recruitment and training, the social and emotional needs of the ninth graders, and the physical design of the school building. These purposes were addressed through three research questions. In addition, the leadership of the administrative staff and the high school faculty, as related to these purposes, was a focus of the study. As Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) explained, “Listening to those who are intimately involved in the transition to high school, including students, teachers, and school administrators, may provide insight into how school structures may meet the students’ needs and foster developmentally responsive environments” (p. 174). Freebody (2005) also pointed out that “people’s practices in particular educational contexts have been described as displaying uncertain, complex, messy and fleeting properties, which together call for distinctive research approaches to description, understanding and explanation” (p. 81). Therefore, it is imperative that all elements of the transition to high school are studied.

Research Questions

Three research questions were used to guide this study and help frame the research. The research questions were as follows:

1. What processes do district and campus level administrators use to create a ninth-grade center?
2. What components of the ninth-grade center have the greatest impact on student success?
3. What perceptions do staff have regarding the process of students transitioning from middle school to the ninth grade?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that guided this study was comprised of three components.

The first component was the recruitment of the teaching staff, how they were trained, and the various supports they received to better serve the needs of ninth graders. This area was specifically designed to examine teacher backgrounds, certification, and training. An element of this training included the use of professional learning communities (PLCs) and the effect the PLC structure had on the success of the ninth-grade campus. The focus was specifically to examine the outcomes that arose from teacher collaboration and participation in PLC teams and how that structure impacted student achievement. Teacher collaboration is based on the belief that teachers working collaboratively leads to a higher quality of instruction, which results in an improvement in student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

The next component addressed the social and emotional needs of ninth graders. To explore this component, I examined the specific areas related to the affective domain of student development. This area also included the relationships the students formed with one another as well as with their teachers. The climate and culture of the campus was also studied. Specifically, the school administrator's role in developing and implementing programs that address a ninth-grader's social and emotional development was examined. These practices included events that occur prior to the start of the ninth-grade year and those that are sustained throughout the school year.

The final component examined was the physical design of the building, its location to the main high school, the administrative structures of the facility and how ninth graders were arranged or configured on the campus. This configuration included whether the ninth graders were housed in the same hallway or wing of the larger high school, such as a freshman wing. Another configuration could involve housing ninth graders in a different building separate from the main high school campus yet be associated with the main school through shared staff. Such a

configuration could provide opportunities for ninth graders to enroll in advanced courses and allow them to participate in extracurricular activities at the main high school campus. This section of the framework also led to an examination of the various administrative decisions made to specifically address the unique needs of ninth graders, including counseling support, additional staff and the campus bell schedule and class schedule. Furthermore, the various supports and practices put in place by the administration to best meet the design of the ninth-grade campus influenced each of the three parts.

The three components are identified in Figure 1, offering a visual depiction of the conceptual framework outlining this study. Key words are added under the three components to provide clarity and additional references to the study.

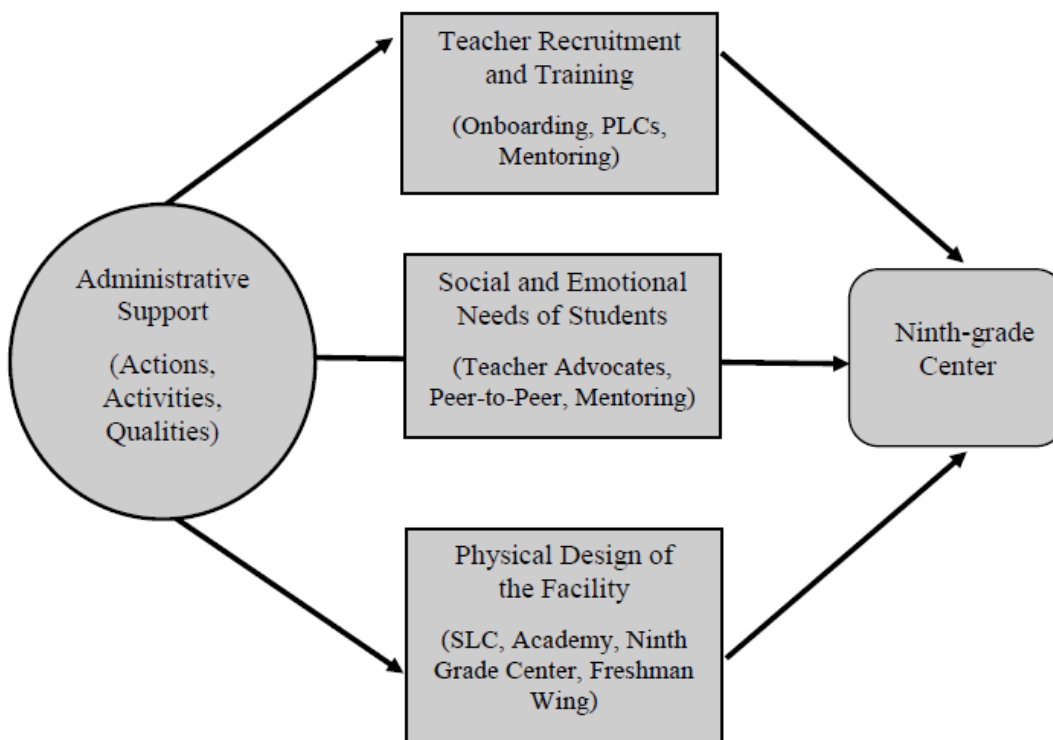


Figure 1. Conceptual framework. This graphic depicts how the elements of the study come together to create the conceptual framework and each of the components.

In summary, the three areas of focus for this study were (a) teacher recruitment and training of staff, which includes the implementation of PLCs throughout the learning

community; (b) the social and emotional needs of ninth graders; and (c) the physical design of the school facility with a focus on the arrangement of the ninth graders within the building. Each component represented in Figure 1 depicts how administrative support, enacted through specific actions, activities, and leadership qualities, could affect these three components and the potential effect they could have on the achievement of students who transition to a ninth-grade center in their first year of high school.

Significance of the Study

According to Elder's (1998) life course theory, the life course is a "tapestry of intertwined developmental trajectories structured by transitions and turning points" that a person experiences throughout his or her lifetime (p. 1). One of these significant turning points is a child's transition from middle school to high school. There is a certain level of predictability regarding this transition; however, some students will struggle with the change from middle school to high school (Benner, Boyle & Bakhtiari, 2017). There is evidence to support these struggles, including reduction of grades (Benner & Graham, 2009); decrease in a student's motivation to attend and participate while in school (Barber & Olsen, 2004); and feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Benner, et al., 2007; DeJesus, 2008; Noddings, 2004). Understanding these struggles with transition and being responsive to the needs of ninth graders is critical as it is during this time, students' academic achievement is at its highest stake as students are more likely to drop out of high school during the freshman year (Benner et al., 2017).

This research was designed to assist school administrators and staff with the successful design, organization, and implementation of a ninth-grade center. Information obtained from this study will provide data for school and district administrators in the planning and operating of

ninth-grade centers and could be used to support the development, organization, and formation of a ninth-grade center in their district. The positive impact on the administrative leadership of the ninth-grade center could significantly impact student achievement and the overall success of the campus. This information also could be valuable to school districts who are considering a ninth-grade center. The findings may be used as a launching pad when designing a ninth-grade center and information to support the development of a separate campus to address the unique and individual needs of ninth graders.

Delimitations of the Study

Several delimitations narrowed the scope of this study. First, the sample was limited to teachers, counselors, campus administrators, and selected district administrators, to the exclusion of school librarians, paraprofessionals, and other support staff. The latter groups usually have minimal involvement in the middle to high school transition process and the overall implementation of ninth-grade centers. Also, the sample included practitioners from one public school district in Texas. The district used as the research site is a large suburban school district with an enrollment of over 12,800 students. The district contains two high schools and one ninth-grade campus. For this study, only the ninth-grade campus was studied. Participants from the campus and district central office were invited to participate in individual interviews. Participants from the campus were also asked to participate in a focus-group interview. Both the individual interviews and the focus-group interviews were conducted on the campus.

Positionality and Reflexivity

This study was focused largely on district actions that support the development of ninth-grade centers. Qualitative research calls for the researcher to be the primary instrument of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2008). This human element

may itself lead to researcher bias because personal understanding and meaning may influence data collection (Moustakas, 1994; Merriam, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Every attempt was made to limit researcher bias, but researcher bias may be of concern. The process of reduction is used in qualitative research to assist the researcher in focusing on the topic and questions of the study in an effort to element or greatly reduce researcher bias (Moustakas, 1994). The first step in reduction is bracketing, the process by which the researcher actively identifies all preconceived notions of the research topic in order to interpret the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994; Gearing, 2004; Creswell & Poth, 2018). To bracket myself from this bias, I was not present during the individual interviews or the focus-group interview. Pseudonyms were self-selected by each participant and used for the individual interviews and focus-group interview. All of the data were transcribed by an outside transcription service. As the researcher, I took notes during the analysis of the data to ensure my perspectives of the transcriptions were unbiased. I also used a former doctoral student from the University of North Texas to serve as the external facilitator. Dr. Christy Fiori has experience with qualitative research and is an administrator in a school district in the region. She served as the moderator of the focus-group interview and conducted the individual in-depth interviews. Dr. Fiori has no direct ties to the research site or with any of the participants of this study. She also completed the National Institutes of Health (NIH) web-based training on protection of human subjects and was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Definition of Terms

To provide uniformity of understanding and meaning to this study, the following definitions of terms are offered as the terms were used in this study.

- *Campus administrator.* The principal and assistant principal(s) of a school. This term is used interchangeably with the term school administrator.
- *Career technical education (CTE).* Courses that are designed to help students explore different fields of study and gain technical skills used for college or careers.
- *District.* A legal entity defined as an independent school district (ISD) and governed by an elected board of trustees. For this study, the term district also encompassed the administrative staff that works at the central office of the ISD.
- *District administrator.* Any district central office administrator who supervises or supports campuses, especially in the areas of administrative services, personnel, curriculum, instruction, or professional learning. This term also may be used when describing district support staff, such as curriculum directors or instructional coaches.
- *Ninth-grade center/ninth-grade campus or academy.* The terms ninth-grade center and ninth-grade campus are used synonymously. Such a campus may be referred to as a school-within-a-school, learning community, cluster, house, team, or wing, among other terms. The ninth-grade center helps to downsize the number of the student population into a manageable student population by grouping ninth-grade students together. Organization of this nature allows ninth graders to adapt to their surroundings on a smaller scale and provides more opportunities for teacher contact and personalized attention (McIntosh & White, 2006).
- *Professional learning community (PLC).* A PLC is a group of “professional educators working collectively and purposefully to create and sustain a culture of learning for all students and adults” (Hipp & Huffman, 2010, p. 12).
- *Small learning community (SLC).* This term may be referred to as a school-within-a-school. It is a school organizational model that organizes large school populations into smaller,

autonomous groups of students and teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

- *Social and emotional learning (SEL)*. SEL is the process through which children understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Schonert-Reichel, Kitil & Hanson-Peterson, 2017).

Assumptions of the Study

Several assumptions were made in the design of this study. First, the value of the results and conclusions of this research stem from the assumption that the population sample is representative of high school teachers and administrators in American public schools, or at least those in the Texas public school system. Secondly, I assumed the participants were familiar with the general struggles ninth graders encounter during their transition from middle to high school. I assumed the participants would give truthful and honest feedback regarding their perceptions of the support their school district provides and trust the promise of guaranteed confidentiality. Finally, I assumed the participants would thoughtfully consider their responses and assume sincerity of these responses.

Organization of the Study

The organization of this dissertation includes five chapters. Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the study and includes the statement of the problem, purpose and significance of the study, overview of the conceptual framework, delimitations, positionality, assumptions, and definitions of terms. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature relevant to this study, highlighting issues and trends related to the middle school to high school transition, as well as support of educators through professional learning communities, and a focus on the social and emotional needs of ninth graders. Chapter 3 details the research methodology used in the study; the

population and sample information; data collection procedures, including focus-group and individual interviews; and the procedures for analyzing the data. Chapter 4 contains the results of the focus-group and individual interviews, and an analysis of the data. Chapter 5 includes the conclusions and a discussion of the findings. Chapter 5 also contains recommendations for school districts and campus administrators related to ninth-grade centers, as well as possible questions for future research.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to examine best practices of the campus and district administration and staff related to the design and implementation of ninth-grade centers. The components examined were teacher recruitment and training practices, particularly as they related to professional learning communities; the unique social and emotional needs of the ninth graders; and the physical organization and structure of the ninth graders within the facility. The transition from middle school to high school has been studied extensively and reported in the literature. Results of this study will provide an in-depth understanding of these transitional needs to make the transition from middle school to high school a more successful experience for ninth graders. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature with an identification of challenges associated with the transition from middle school to high school and the identification of the measures school districts are utilizing to combat these challenges.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There is a substantial amount of literature available regarding the difficulty some freshman students experience as they transition from middle school to high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Mitzelle & Irvin, 2000). Previous literature focused primarily on the issues and obstacles students face during the freshman year of high school and the primary origin of these issues (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2015; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). This review of the literature suggests that separate ninth-grade campuses can have a significant impact on student engagement and academic achievement levels of high school students (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

The transition from middle school to high school has been documented with statistics to support the challenges freshman students face during this transition (Sims, 2010). Failure rates reported by the NCES (2010) indicated 24.5% of ninth graders did not pass all their courses and, subsequently, they were not able to advance to the next grade. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) (2011) reported a 7.3% dropout rate for the 2008-2009 school year. The number was higher in the ninth grade than any other high school grade level for course failures, in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions and expulsion rates, and truancy and dropout rates (NCES, 2010). These statistics were higher for minority students. Furthermore, disparities among students of color “are more evident in the ninth grade with African American and Latino students’ failure rate being most pronounced with a dropout rate being 23-27% higher than their nonwhite peers” (Cooper, 2011, p. 26). Based on these statistics, some districts make plans to reconfigure the grade alignment of their high schools. This reconfiguration involves grouping ninth graders together in a specific area of the building or relocating the ninth graders to a

separate campus to better meet the unique needs of this specific population.

Junior High School versus Middle School Concept

When examining the transition of students from middle school to high school, it is helpful to review where students are coming from as they move into high school. Over the past decade, as some school districts transitioned from a junior high concept to a middle school concept, they moved ninth graders to the comprehensive high school. Most districts group sixth graders, seventh graders, and eighth graders together, typically leaving ninth graders to be housed with tenth through twelfth graders (Viadero, 2004). This grouping can present its own unique challenges, as freshman students, at 14 years of age, are changing physically and emotionally. Transitioning to a different campus and entering a school with a larger student population can result in freshman students feeling overwhelmed and isolated (Ellerbrock, 2012). These challenges are not exclusive to students who might have preceding academic struggles in school. Many average or high-achieving eighth graders experience a dramatic decline in grades and attendance after the middle school to high school transition. Ninth graders may experience difficulty in transitioning from middle school to high school due to the “high expectations from teachers, additional homework, and the freedom of selecting the most appropriate classes and activities” (Styron & Peasant, 2010, p. 3). High school graduation requirements contribute to increased pressure for students to perform well academically, beginning with the freshman year. Some ninth graders admit they feel lost and disconnected in the high school setting, which could eventually cause them to lose interest in school and drop out (Sims, 2010). By high school, as many as 40% to 60% of students reportedly felt disengaged from the overall high school experience, resulting in an increase in the freshman failure rate (Klem & Connell, 2004).

Transition from Middle School to High School

The transition from middle school to high school can be a difficult one for many students. A significant body of research has revealed that the transition from middle school to high school is one of the most substantial chapters in a student's school experience in regard to academic failures coupled with momentous social, emotional, and behavioral changes (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Benner, Boyle & Bakhtiari, 2017; Ellerbrock, 2012; Longobardi, Prino, Marengo & Settanni, 2016). According to Kelly (2013), the transition from middle school to high school "has been an extremely critical factor in the student's experiences in high school and their academic achievement" (p. 11). This transition is one that affects a student both academically and emotionally. As noted by Cook, Fowler, and Harris (2008), "ninth-graders are adolescents undergoing the difficult transition from middle school to high school. They face a daunting task in overcoming the social, emotional, physical and intellectual challenges of this stage of development" (p. 2). Students typically transition from a smaller middle school campus to a larger high school campus where they experience a higher student enrollment and additional course offerings that include more rigorous and challenging choices, such as advanced placement courses. Entering high school exposes students to more thought-provoking learning, more rigorous tasks and more advanced learning goals, therefore placing more pressure on the ninth graders' social and emotional well-being (Scalera & Aliverini, 2010). Students with academic challenges are at a greater risk of failure during this transition period, but even the students who excelled in middle school encounter challenges during the transition to high school (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

Traditionally, some high schools follow an established teacher status system that delegates the entry level courses to the least experienced teachers (Neild et al., 2015). In

addition, ninth-grade teachers are more likely to be uncertified, new to teaching and/or newer to the school than those teaching upper grade students (Neild & Farely, 2005). Therefore, insufficient teacher preparation and training may add to transition challenges ninth graders experience when entering high school. New and inexperienced teachers may not be equipped to address the social and emotional needs of ninth graders. Many districts approach this transition differently by creating separate learning spaces for their ninth graders (Akos & Galassi, 2004). The purpose of this study was to explore the transition from middle school to high school when school districts implement a separate ninth-grade campus designed specifically to meet the unique needs of high school freshmen.

School administrators continually attempt to find viable solutions for supporting ninth graders as they move from middle school to high school. Retention and dropout rates are significantly higher for students in ninth grade than any other grade in high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Current research indicates a strategic focus on freshman learners as they transition to high school. This focus explores the entire freshman year experience with an emphasis on observing marked improvement in both academic performance and social and emotional development. According to Kelly (2013), research studies have revealed that “making a successful transition to high school can help students form lasting attachments to school and increase students’ likelihood of graduating from high school” (p. 12). In addition, if students receive additional support during the ninth-grade year, their chances of graduating from high school increase substantially (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Struggles in the ninth grade, including poor attendance and course failures, have a significant impact on the likelihood of ninth graders dropping out of high school. Focusing specifically on the unique needs of ninth graders as they

transition to high school may be a key factor in reducing the dropout rate (Neild, Stoner-Eby & Furstenberg, 2015).

The ninth-grade year can be a trying and challenging one for many students. Students enter high school with the goal of graduating in four years, but some students fall short of achieving this goal (Neild, 2009). Reports indicate the national average for freshman high school graduation rates was between 66% and 86% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). Texas faces its own share of challenges in this area. The NCES data for Texas reports less than 75% of freshmen graduated from high school between 2001 and 2008. Based on a study of ninth graders in large high schools with no assistance or additional supports, Orfield (2004) concluded that one out of every three freshman students will graduate from high school. This statistic sparked much of the educational reform movement of the 21st Century, as politicians, members of the business community, policy makers, and school leaders focused their efforts on developing strategies to increase the high school graduation rate (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

While reaching the goal of graduating from high school is a significant struggle for some students, advancing to the next grade level can also prove challenging. In the 2005-2006 school year, more than 26% of freshmen did not make it to grade 10, according to the National Center for the Education Statistics and the U. S. Department of Education (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Not experiencing a sense of belonging or a connection to their teachers or school in general was cited as one of the factors that attributed to students experiencing failure in ninth grade (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Positive and genuine relationships between the teacher and the student may contribute to a student's adaption to a new school environment, both academically and behaviorally (Longobardi et al., 2016). Roderick (2013) stated at-risk students are especially in

need of school connections and supports because they have fewer positive influences at home to aid in the stressful demands of transitioning to high school and therefore might experience a higher number of failures in ninth grade.

High School Organization

How the high school is organized regarding grade level configuration, counselor and administrative support, curriculum, and the school's proximity to the comprehensive high school may have an impact on the success that students encounter during the first year of high school. Most high schools are not designed with a student's development needs in mind; typically, high schools are designed for efficiency and function (Cook, 2015). The traditional high school tends to adhere to a ninth through twelfth-grade configuration with a seven-period high school schedule consisting of 50-minute class periods. Often, the high schools are organized by subject matter departments, with a teacher-centered focus on the content of the course. The teacher's instructional focus is concerned more with the subject matter than on individual learner needs which, if unchecked, can lead to students experiencing high levels of anonymity and alienation from peers and adult advocates (Neild, 2009). Courses are taught in isolation with little opportunity for educators to collaborate and spend time getting to know the needs of the learners in their classrooms. Teachers concentrate more on covering the course material than on working with students and helping those who are struggling (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Such behaviors may ultimately lead to student failures and result in an even greater rate of high school dropouts (Neild, 2009).

At a large high school, most teachers interact daily with a higher number of students. This increase in the number of students can have an impact on the teacher's ability to develop and sustain strong relationships with students. Noddings (2005) asserted that teachers working

in large high schools have a more difficult time connecting with each student due to the inability to establish meaningful relationships necessary to sustain a positive relationship with every student in the classroom. This disconnect between the teacher and the student may have an impact on the student's performance in the class (Neild, 2009). Sustaining these strong and meaningful relationships with students can involve a multitude of implications for positive effects on student achievement as well as the reduction of disciplinary issues (Roderick, 2013). The large high school typically has a higher faculty rate, which can also make it difficult for staff members to form meaningful relationships with one another. The professional learning community concept can provide teachers with the opportunity to form stronger and meaningful working relationships with their peers (Fullan, 2011).

Problems with academic achievement are not the only issue associated with the ninth-grade transition. In addition to cognitive concerns, Simmons, Carlton-Ford, and Blyth (2007) noted issues in the affective domain as students experienced a marked decrease in their feelings of self-worth when transitioning to high school from middle school. Students deal with the added pressures of college and career preparation; increased responsibilities at home; and additional time commitments related to extra-curricular activities, social demands, and family obligations. Because of these added social pressures, coupled with the increase in academic demands such as the calculation of students' grade point averages and class rank, students may begin to see themselves in a more negative light. This issue may influence lower self-esteem in students and a decreased desire to perform well in school (MacIver, 2004). This decrease in the student's self-esteem could cultivate a need for more interventions from the school counselors, as well as supplementary programs to support ninth graders as they transition from middle school to high school.

In addition to the need for strong and responsive counselors, the leadership at both the campus and district level is equally important. The campus and district administrators play a significant role in student success. A strong leader is essential as a principal can “improve the lives of anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand students during a year” (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2014, p. 2). The importance of principal selection when considering a programmatic shift at the high school level is critical. In assessing the value of the principal, the leadership on the campus is second only to the classroom teacher in regard to the impact the role plays on student achievement. The principal sets the tone and provides direction for the campus. When establishing the campus culture and providing the processes needed to affect positive change, a strong principal can make or break any new initiatives. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom and Anderson (2010) stated that the role of the principal focuses on “organizational improvement; more specifically, it is about establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the school and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions” (pp. 9-10). The principal’s role in the recruitment, selection, and training of the staff is a key element in impacting student achievement (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2014). When transforming a high school, a strong principal is needed to lead the charge when addressing high school transition, creating a campus culture that is focused on student achievement, influencing the staff’s ability to impact student success, and implementing new programs to help ninth graders be successful throughout their entire high school experience, while supporting teachers as they work to implement these new programs.

Ninth-Grade Centers

School boards and district administrators are tasked with considering and selecting the ideal grade level configurations and most productive grade level arrangements. The arrangement

of grade levels and the various options available for school leaders to use were the focus of a report from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) (2010). *The Grade Span Configuration: Who Goes Where?* report included a review of a case study that addressed this issue. Eight different schools using a variety of grade level configurations were studied. Pros and cons of seven different grade-level configurations were analyzed. Findings revealed that grade configurations were based on the needs and expectations of each community, and they varied from community to community. For example, in many rural districts, there was a greater need to assign middle-grade students to elementary schools to increase community identity and more efficiently utilize campus and district resources (Pagler & Fager, 2010). By contrast, in larger more urban school districts, due to a greater desire to minimize the influence of older students on younger ones, the elementary students were separated from the middle school students. Regarding how the grade levels are arranged, it truly does depend on the desires of the community.

Configuration of Ninth-Grade Centers

Several factors such as the number of students, transportation costs, and the schools system's academic goals for students should be considered when deciding how grade levels are configured, the design of the campus, and what will be best for a community, as suggested by Pagler and Fager (2010). Additional key factors are: (a) socioeconomic status of the student population, (b) effects on other schools, (c) number of transitions for affected students, and (d) school building layout/design. Properly configuring the ninth-grade year can have a positive or negative influence, depending on the setting and types of support provided to incoming high school students. The positive aspects include separating ninth graders from the possible negative influence of upperclassmen. When ninth graders are removed from the main high school

campus, they are less likely to be exposed to the negative behaviors of older students, specifically the use of drugs and alcohol. However, the older students can serve as role models to the younger students. Separating the ninth graders from the upperclassmen prevents the opportunity for junior and senior students to mentor ninth graders on a regular basis (Sims, 2010).

Several factors contribute to high school graduation rates. McIntosh and White (2006) stated, “If a student does not have a good experience that freshman year, the decision to drop out of high school is either consciously or subconsciously made at that time” (p. 41). A successful implementation of the freshman transitional year, however, can have a positive impact on a student’s academic performance (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). One successful option currently used to assist ninth graders in high school is to create a separate ninth-grade campus or center. Some school districts have incorporated a ninth-grade campus into the organizational structure of the school district to reduce student failures at the ninth-grade level (Smith et al., 2018). The U.S. Department of Education (2008) found the ninth-grade campus model to be the most popular method of ninth-grade configurations (Bennett, 2012). Developing a ninth-grade center as a separate organizational structure can provide ninth graders with a more individualized focus and create a sense of community that is sometimes missing in a large high school setting.

Objectives of a Ninth-Grade Campus

The ninth-grade campus model aligns more with middle school and can ease the stress level of ninth graders that is often associated with the demanding academic requirements and social pressures faced at a typical high school (Smith et al., 2018). When developing a ninth-grade campus, one of the primary objectives of the campus leadership revolves around the need to lay a positive foundation and create a strong transition program and process for students, prior

to and when they begin their high school career. This effort is accomplished when the campus leadership leads the campus with the understanding that the entire freshman year should be treated as one of transition, whereby students are accepted where they are and guided with support, both academically and socially (Habeb, 2013). This type of model calls for the creation and establishment of a more individualized, positive, and welcoming environment for freshmen throughout their initial year of high school (Cook, 2015). The ninth-grade campus model is inclusive of a staff that strongly desires to work with ninth-grade students.

Ninth-grade campuses or centers include the various roles and responsibilities of staff members who are not classroom teachers but are support personnel. Typically, in addition to the teaching staff, the ninth-grade campus is staffed with its own principal, assistant principals, and counselors who want to work with ninth graders. Traditionally, a counselor is charged with providing students with necessary information to navigate the sometimes-bureaucratic system that encompasses many high schools. Often, the opportunities for counselors to provide actual guidance to students are overshadowed by responsibilities associated with overseeing the administration of standardized testing and managing a student's course selection (Cook, 2015).

It is important that counselors be given the opportunity to provide effective services and supports to ninth graders in all three domains: academic, career, and personal-social issues (Habeb, 2013). Counselors play an important role in assisting students with the transition to high school by developing strong relationships, supporting students emotionally, and assisting with academic advisement. When students transition from one school setting to another, their self-perceptions tend to decline, causing a greater need to seek support from a school counselor. The size and fragmented nature of a large comprehensive high school can cause students to struggle more with attendance, passing all of their courses, and earning the required credits to

advance beyond the ninth grade (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). The support of a strong counseling program can ease the struggles students experience when transitioning from middle school to high school (Habeb, 2013). A shift in emphasis from an academic counseling focus to one that addresses the social and emotional aspect of a student's high school experience has become more prevalent in high schools (Cook, 2015). The need for adult allies is an important component of a successful high school transition program, and counselors can play a significant role in serving as an adult advocate for ninth graders.

Developmental Needs of Ninth-Grade Students

Problems with academic achievement are not the only issues associated with the ninth-grade transition. In addition to cognitive concerns, Simmons et al. (2007) noted issues in the affective domain as students' self-worth saw a marked decrease during the middle school to high school transition. According to Eccles (2004), the organization of the high school learning environment must be altered to fit students' developmental needs.

Individuals have changing emotional, cognitive, and social needs and personal goals as they mature...schools need to change in developmentally appropriate ways if they are to provide the kind of social context that will continue to motivate students' interest and engagement as the students mature. (pp. 125-126)

Because of students' changing emotional and social needs and personal goals, coupled with their cognitive needs, students may experience difficulties trying to balance their needs and begin to see themselves in a more negative light (MacIver, 2004). As a result, they may experience a decrease in their self-esteem and desire to perform well in school. Therefore, it is essential that the high school environment is responsive to the social and emotional, as well as the academic, needs of ninth graders.

Small Learning Communities

The enrollment size of a school can be a contributing factor to students becoming

disengaged and eventually dropping out of high school (Kerr, 2003). Typically, high schools have a greater student enrollment than middle schools. In 2001-2002, the average middle school enrollment was 630 students in contrast to the majority of the high school enrollments totaling 1,000 students or greater (Hoffman, 2003). According to Allen (2002), more than 70% of high school students attended schools that exceeded 1,000 students, and many high schools housed populations over 3,000 students.

Most high schools are not organized with the students' developmental needs as the primary focus. Typically, high schools are organized in a traditional format that includes the departmentalization of teachers, students grouped according to academic ability, teacher-centered instructional design, and an enrollment rate of over 1,500 (NASSP, 2006). The higher student enrollment can lead to an increase in discipline problems, attendance issues, lack of parent involvement, and greater risk for dropouts (Kerr, 2003). Studies on high school reform suggest that student achievement improves when students are arranged in smaller groups, so teachers can get to know students better and individual student needs can be more accurately addressed (Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort, 2002). The large high school setting has been criticized as not adequately meeting the needs of all students, thereby creating a desire to implement a small school concept within the large high school. The U.S. Department of Education responded to concerns about oversized high schools not meeting the needs of all students with the creation of the smaller learning communities program (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Cauley and Jovanich (2016) defined a small learning community (SLC) as a "small school within a larger school" (p. 16) where students and their teachers are geographically grouped together in close proximity. Many districts divide student enrollment into smaller

groups to create SLCs (Kerr, 2003). By implementing SLCs, schools have been able to ease the transition from middle school to high school. Habeeb, Moore, and Seibert (2008) identified the essential element of SLCs as a team of teachers who: (a) teach core classes, (b) share a common planning time that allows for regular collaboration to occur, and (c) share the same heterogeneously grouped students. The teams typically consist of three to five teachers who teach primarily the core subjects of English, mathematics, science, and social studies, and are assigned a student load of no more than 130 students (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Smith, Akos, Lim, and Wiley (2018) recommended that the SLCs focus on rigorous instruction that challenges all students, implement a relevant curriculum allowing students to make connections to the world outside of school, and create the development of meaningful relationships between the students and adults.

Being assigned a smaller number of students creates the opportunity for a more personal, supportive learning environment for students, and gives teachers a more manageable workload so they may better meet the individual needs of every student (Ellerbrock, 2012). The team concept of SLCs is beneficial to both students and teachers. Teachers experience the benefits of working collaboratively with their colleagues, and this collaboration supports a variety of personal and professional needs (Jackson & Davis, 2000). According to the National Middle School Association (NMSA) (2010), the team concept serves as “the foundation for a strong learning community” and is “characterized by a sense of family” (p. 31). Teachers are better prepared to meet the needs of their students when they can share their ideas and work collaboratively.

By providing teachers a shared time for planning, teachers can communicate about students’ needs and possible supports or interventions, collaborate in lesson design, create

consistent classroom management expectations, calendar assessments so there are no overlaps, meet with parents to discuss student progress, and organize team-wide activities and events (Ellerbrock, 2012). These team-wide activities and events serve a dual purpose of providing students the opportunity to develop positive relationships with peers and staff while engaging the students in school-based activities that can increase student attendance rates and the student's connection to the school. This experience is a benefit to both students and teachers, allowing students to experience a strong sense of community and peer acceptance and giving teachers the opportunity to create deeper relationships with students by connecting on a more personal level (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Additional elements of SLCs include the designation of staff members assigned to work solely with ninth-grade students, freshman-specific courses, increase opportunities to involve parents, and eighth-to ninth-grade transition programs designed to provide ninth graders with additional supports (Sammon, 2007).

Academic Teaming

Small learning communities with the academic teaming concept have been successfully associated with middle schools for years; however, there is a deficiency in the literature regarding the effects of SLCs at the high school level as they specifically include the academic teaming component (Legters & Kerr, 2001). Legters and Kerr's quantitative study addressed this gap in the research by investigating how organizational reform efforts associated with SLCs met the needs of ninth-grade students. Legters and Kerr's research found 26.6% of all high schools in Maryland organized their ninth-grade students and teachers into SLCs that included the academic teaming component; however, less than 10% of these high schools implemented the academic teaming component of SLCs with fidelity and at a high level. Most ninth-grade campuses were found to operate with more of a middle school mindset, rather than what exists in

typical high schools. These ninth-grade campuses grouped teachers into academic teams or houses that shared a common set of teachers similar to the middle school concept (Smith et al., 2018).

The idea behind teaming is not simply grouping teachers together for traditional grade-level or department planning. Teaming also involves working interdependently to achieve a common goal for which each team member is held mutually accountable (DuFour, Eaker, Many, Mattos & DuFour, 2016). Academic teams share more than the students; they also share the curriculum and integrate the curriculum across the four core subject areas of English, mathematics, science, and social studies (Smith et al., 2018). According to Yisrael (2008), academic teaming (a) promotes a sense of belonging among the students, (b) allows teachers to establish goals as a team to better meet the needs of the students, (c) helps teachers monitor attendance behavior and address individual student issues or concerns, (d) provides the opportunity for teachers to assist students with organization and time management, and (d) allows for interdisciplinary units of study. One of the main ideas behind academic teaming is to provide students with a structure that can assist them academically and socially.

Yisrael (2008) conducted a qualitative case study to investigate academic teaming at the ninth-grade level. The allotted time for teaming efforts gave ninth-grade teachers the chance to discuss the needs of their students on a regular basis. In addition, common planning times created the opportunity for teachers to plan together, schedule conferences, and support one another. Yisrael's findings revealed that an academic teaching approach and a more supportive and collaborative culture can have a positive impact on teacher morale and effectiveness.

Although many positive aspects of arranging students into SLCs exist, this system of placing students and teachers into academic teams has been criticized. McIntosh and White

(2006) claimed that one disadvantage to this model is the unintentional division created within the faculty that may fracture existing relationships. Because teachers are grouped with their team, they may have limited access to other staff members and find developing strong relationships with other staff members to be challenging.

Staff Recruitment and Training

Having the right staff, including the principal, counselors, and teachers, is an essential component of a successful ninth-grade campus or center. The principal serves as the instructional leader and, together with the teachers, works in collaboration to support the students and impact their achievement (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2014). The principal, with administrative support from central office, is responsible for hiring teachers and staff who they deem to be most appropriate for working with students who are transitioning to the ninth-grade campus. Effective principals play a primary role in attracting, supporting, and retaining a high-quality staff. Recruiting teachers who are highly qualified to work with ninth graders and who desire to scaffold instruction for students to be successful can positively influence student outcomes (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2014). Therefore, it is critical that recruitment efforts to hire teachers who are assigned to teach exclusively at the ninth-grade level are based on two primary considerations: the teacher desires to work with ninth graders and the teacher is responsive to the developmental traits of these unique learners (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Teacher buy-in is a foundational component of a strong ninth-grade campus (Ellerbrock & Kieffer, 2010). As stated by Darling-Hammond (2000), “teacher effectiveness is a strong determinant of differences in student learning” (p. 2). Consequently, recruiting and hiring teachers who have a strong desire to work exclusively with ninth grade students is vital.

After reviewing their hiring practices and making necessary changes to recruit and retain high quality staff, districts are starting to move away from a centralized hiring process to one that is decentralized and campus based. Existing teachers at a campus are included in the hiring process. They are being asked to help create hiring profiles that align with the school's mission and vision (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005), screen resumes, and serve on interview teams (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). Prospective applicants may be expected to collaborate as a team member on a lesson and then demonstrate the lesson to the interview team.

Once teachers are hired, they must receive proper training on what to teach, how to interact with ninth graders, and how to best meet the needs of their students. Creating and providing engaging and meaningful professional learning opportunities assist teachers in meeting the challenging demands of the teaching profession (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, Gardner & Espinoza, 2017). New teachers may not have received adequate training in their teacher preparation program regarding how to work with ninth graders who are transitioning to high school which can add to the complexity of working within a SLC. Fritzer and Herbst (2006) recommended that both new and veteran teachers receive ongoing staff development on how students learn, how to foster student's "critical thinking skills" through "Socratic argument" and "Socratic seminars," how to develop "graphic organizers," and how to create and facilitate "cooperative learning groups" (p. 8).

Professional learning opportunities and training for teachers and support staff are critical elements of teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2000). To support students' social and emotional needs, Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) recommended that teachers and support staff be provided professional development training and offered additional professional learning opportunities. They suggested that such training focus on providing student learners with

engaging and stimulating instruction and activities that are designed to build positive relationships with both their classmates and the teacher. Training that addresses ways in which teachers might design specific lessons that include 21st century skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity, also known as the Four Cs (National Education Association, 2019), should be provided to teachers. The design of the ninth-grade curriculum can also assist students as they transition from middle school to high school. What is taught, and more importantly, *how* it is taught, should be considered when meeting the needs of ninth graders. Teachers must be on point with the curriculum as students move academically from middle school to high school and work toward graduating from high school.

There is a concerted movement behind abandoning old methods of teaching and adopting more innovative and engaging ones. An essential component of this movement involves professional development training. Wiggins and McTighe (2008) believe that educators must let go of teaching methods and assessment models that focus on the acquisition of knowledge by placing a greater emphasis on what knowledge actually means and how knowledge can be transferred to new situations. Such a shift can “aid students greatly in solving problems in the real world” (p. 37). Requiring teachers to have the proper training and development could be instrumental for teachers of ninth graders as they work together to facilitate a smoother transition for each ninth-grade student and create conditions for a more successful high school experience.

Professional Learning Communities

Teams of teachers who work collaboratively to improve instruction can positively impact student performance (Fullan, 2011). Professional learning communities (PLCs) provide a framework for intentional teacher collaboration, which can lead to an improvement in teacher quality and student achievement (Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017). The PLC structure is used

frequently in schools and school districts as a method of organizing teachers into working groups. This concept is more than simply organizing teachers into working groups; therefore, time and attention must be given for groups to be formed into highly functioning teams where each staff member has a contributing role (DuFour, Eaker, Many, Mattos & DuFour, 2016). A PLC ensures every teacher is a member of a collaborative team and is provided time during the work week for collaboration with a focus on the success of all students. Teachers and administrators have a shared leadership structure that is supportive and allows for purposeful collaboration and shared decision making, with a focus on improving student achievement (Fullan, 2011). This work extends beyond the campus staff to also include the central office staff. Fullan believes that by adopting a two-way collaboration model between the campus and central office, systemic change will occur, and student performance will improve when these goals are shared.

Teacher collaboration within the design and configuration of a ninth-grade campus is a necessary component, particularly when attempting to improve student achievement (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). To assist students with their transition from middle school to high school, district and campus leaders are advised to consider implementing a PLC model. Training for teachers and administrators on what it means to be a member of a PLC must be incorporated in the campus and district professional development and training offerings, so PLCs can be successfully implemented and sustained (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). The foundation of this training centers around three significant themes: (1) a foundation of collaborative development that consists of shared mission, vision, values, and goals; (2) collaborative teams that are working together for a common goal; and (3) a focus on outcomes as proof of an assurance of continuous improvement (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). Providing this training through an

engaging model where participants are actively involved, the material is content focused and directly related to job duties and responsibilities, and the format is job-embedded are essential components for professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). As professional learning communities are forming and norming as a team, the teachers are asked to keep these four questions at the forefront of their work (DuFour, Eaker, Many, Mattos & DuFour, 2016):

1. What do we want students to learn?
2. How will we know if they have learned it?
3. What are we going to do if they do not learn?
4. How do we respond when they have already learned?

As these questions serve as the primary focus of the teacher's work, the school must also develop a mission and vision that reflects student learning (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). An essential theme of this work is to have student learning as the primary focus, not teaching (DuFour, Eaker, Many, Mattos & DuFour, 2016). The shift of focus in the classroom to a more student-centered approach rather than a teacher-centered one can have a positive impact on a student's academic performance at school (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005).

The high-level focus on student learning is an integral part of a ninth-grade campus. A PLC engages teacher collaborative teams in developing a guaranteed and viable curriculum and ensuring all students are provided access to the curriculum (DuFour, Eaker, Many, Mattos & DuFour, 2016). Incorporating a PLC model in a ninth-grade campus requires the external and organizational leadership and support of both district administrators and campus leaders (Talbert, 2010) as implementation of the PLC model poses challenges that may need to be addressed at both levels. Providing support to the campus principal is a key element of the process. Strong, well-prepared and engaged campus leadership is an important element of the PLC implementation process and can possibly impact student achievement (Johnson & Voelkel,

2019). The principal’s role in the PLC process is critical and should be supported by the district level administration.

Principal supervisors must invest in professional learning where attention is centered on the individual growth of the principal rather than focusing on the evaluation of the principal’s job performance (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). When providing support to the principal in creating high-functioning teams on the campus, it is important to note a balance must be achieved. The principal must be able to adequately support the work without overpowering and being too involved in the team’s daily functions (Johnson & Voelkel, 2019).

Regarding the types of external supports necessary, Talbert (2010) offered a series of guiding principles for transforming a campus into a system that supports and sustains PLCs. These principles are illustrated in Table 1. Operating campuses in accordance with Talbert’s principles help to support efforts made to improve schools and support teachers so they can engage in collaborative planning and positively impact the student’s overall school experience. Thus, the incorporation of PLCs into the design of the campus can enhance the effectiveness of the ninth-grade center and SLCs (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

Table 1

Talbert’s Principles of External Support for Campus PLCs

Number	Principle
1	Shift from mechanized bureaucracy to strategy of campus support
2	Deep understanding of PLC core principles
3	Patience with the development process
4	Coherent policies in all departments at all levels to support PLC development
5	Funding of PLC development, implementation, and sustainability
6	Protection of campuses from state and federal accountability systems

How PLC teams are formed is a critical step in the process. Teams can be formed by grouping teachers together in a variety of ways, including teachers who teach the same grade level or same course, vertical teams, interdisciplinary teams, or electronic teams. To be a true PLC team, however, the focus must be on learning (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2002). Most elementary teams are arranged by grade level with secondary teams structured by subject or course. Collaboration between the teams is an essential component of the PLC structure and must take place through an initial, systematic process whereby teachers work interdependently to analyze their work and, as members of the PLC team, search for ways in which they can improve results, either individually or collectively (Talbert, 2010).

Campus leadership plays a critical role in sustaining PLCs on the campus. The principal sets the expectations by communicating the importance of PLCs, creating the conditions that support teachers working together as departments or grade levels, providing training for teachers, and establishing a system that sustains the efforts of PLC teams (Johnson & Voelkel, 2019). The utilization of the PLC model could significantly improve the performance of ninth graders and have an overall positive impact on the ninth-grade campus as a whole (Talbert, 2010). If the teachers and support staff at the ninth-grade campus decide to employ the PLC model, it is vital that the campus leaders, as well as each staff member, be adequately trained in using this model. Training should be heavily emphasized during the onboarding of new staff and implemented throughout the school year to meet the needs of all teachers (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2002). Training should be such that staff can be fully immersed in the use of data to drive decisions regarding instruction. When the teachers and support staff have buy-in, develop a shared knowledge, and discover a common understanding centered on the four critical questions, the ninth-grade campus builds a firm foundation for moving forward with continuous improvement.

Social and Emotional Needs of Ninth Graders

When students experience success during their first year of high school, they are more likely to enjoy their high school experience (McIntosh & White, 2006). Academic needs for ninth graders are a given; yet, having the capacity to meet the social and emotional needs of ninth graders is an equally important component. In addition to their academic needs, adolescents' social and emotional development ought to have an equal amount of attention within the school environment (Akos & Galassi, 2004). According to Eccles' (2004) stage-environment fit theory, "Adolescents may experience a mismatch between their developmental needs and the opportunities provided within their school environment" (p. 127). If this developmental disconnect is not addressed during the ninth-grade year, it has the potential to negatively impact a student's academic and social outcomes. To be most effective, schools should be addressing both the ninth grader's academic and social development during the entire first year of high school.

The adolescent years are a time of significant physical and emotional growth. When ninth graders enter high school, they leave behind a campus with a lower student enrollment and move into a larger campus with a higher enrollment (DeJesus, 2008). Previously situated at the top rung and at the highest grade level, they are demoted to a position where they must climb back down the ladder to the lowest grade level. In addition, they enter a more competitive environment where success is often associated with a student's grade point average and class rank (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). These changes can have a detrimental impact on a ninth grader's social and emotional well-being and overall success at the ninth-grade level (Ellerbrock & Keiffer, 2013).

High levels of stress and anxiety also may be experienced by adolescents as they

transition from middle school to high school (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Zeedyk, Gallacher, Henderson, Hope, Husband & Lindsay, 2003; Smith et al., 2018). Students tend to experience a disconnect between themselves and the high school and have feelings of being “lost and forgotten,” along with prolonged periods of loneliness (New, Myers, Newman, Lohman, & Smith, 2000, p. 6). DeJesus (2008), founder of the Youth Development and Research Fund, suggested that students who eventually drop out of high school do so because of their inability to achieve a sense of belonging, establish a positive role and relationship with others within their peer group, and find adults who respect them. On the other hand, when students receive mutual respect from their teachers and feel valued as an individual, they are more engaged in the learning, more likely to attend school, and more likely to perform at higher levels in the classroom. These types of positive relationships are critical for ninth graders as they move into a larger high school from their middle schools. For their social needs to be met at school, freshmen need to develop a sense of belonging with other freshmen. Students also need to be able to gain access to an adult advocate who can provide them with social and emotional support at school. When teachers can focus on a personal level with their students, this personalization helps to ease the transition into high school (Ellerbrock, 2012). In addition, teachers and support staff can focus on providing learners with engaging and stimulating instruction and activities designed to build positive relationships and support students’ social and emotional needs. When teachers collaborate and share their ideas within their PLCs and SLCs, they can discover many of these concepts which, in turn, can benefit students and their class members as well as the teachers (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005).

While there is a significant need to establish and maintain positive relationships with all high school students, freshmen require more attention as they transition into high school

(Barrow, 2015). The intentional development of positive and caring relationships between teachers and students, grounded in trust and mutual respect, has been found to have a favorable impact on a student's experience in high school (Eccles, 2004). Eccles proposed that administrators adjust the overall organization and configuration of high school to better accommodate the developmental needs of ninth graders.

Individuals have changing emotional, cognitive, and social needs and personal goals as they mature...schools need to change in developmentally appropriate ways if they are to provide the kind of social context that will continue to motivate students' interest and engagement as the students mature. (pp. 125-126)

Research has shown the importance a caring adult can play in the lives of young people, especially for young people who might not have positive adult role models at home (Barrow, 2015). A strong mentoring program could help students with both academic and emotional needs. The use of a mentoring program, either peer-to-peer or adult-to-student, can assist students who are struggling in high school.

A student's sense of belonging needs to be developed early; thus, it is essential for students to be provided opportunities to build new peer relationships, find a positive group in which to belong, and participate in school activities (Kerr, 2002). Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009) asserted that a student's need to feel connected to his or her classmates and school can impact the student's social needs as well as his or her academic achievement. They contended that students who maintain a sense of belonging during high school tend to be more intrinsically motivated to work harder at school which, in turn, can result in higher levels of academic achievement, increased student attendance rates, and decreased disciplinary incidents.

A Culture of Caring

Teachers can play a significant role in the creation and development of a caring classroom. A caring classroom persuades students to gain a deeper connection to both teacher

and school; however, it is difficult to quantify care (Schussler & Collins, 2006; Noddings, 2005). Benner, Boyle and Bakhtiari's (2017) findings suggested that a supportive and caring relationship between the ninth-grade student and his or her teacher may help to mitigate the issues ninth graders experience when transitioning from middle school to high school. This caring relationship can have a positive impact on the success of the student in the classroom and the overall environment of the school. Specific steps to establish a caring and nurturing classroom environment can also contribute to the ability to establish connections between the students and their school (Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2009).

Applied to the school setting, caring can have a reciprocal approach. According to Noddings (2005), the intrinsic need and desire to be cared for is a universal characteristic, void of age limitation. All people have a desire to be cared for; yet, unless care is received, the relationship is incomplete because, "no matter how hard teachers try to care, if the caring is not received by students, the claim 'they don't care' has some validity" (p. 15). It is essential that students are around teachers who care about them. Teachers reach out to students to protect them and "promote their development" and some students elect to "give back" in order to "support the success of the school community" (Chaskin & Rauner, 2005, p. 668). Students need positive adult role models to help them through the challenges of high school. Developing a positive student-teacher relationship can impact the success of students while in high school and sustaining that relationship over time can help to reduce the high school dropout rate (Noddings, 2004). Therefore, recruiting caring teachers and staff who are truly concerned about the success and well-being of their students stands out as an integral part of the success of ninth-grade campuses.

Without question, to succeed in high school, students must learn how to navigate their

new physical surroundings and find ways to establish positive social relationships within new peer groups. From the social perspective, this transition requires them to expand their social network and meet new students from other middle schools; however, they may have to leave old friendships behind to establish new ones (Schiller, 2009). These new relationships may alter the ninth grader's path in high school in positive or negative ways which, in turn, may impact other aspects of the student's high school experience. As ninth-grade students develop new friendships and, in some cases, sever ties with other friends, the issues they encounter due to drastic changes with their relationships may negatively influence their sense of self (Barrow, 2015). Ninth graders may have a difficult time negotiating the new relationships and the peer pressure associated with these relationships which might cause them to participate in activities such as underage drinking and/or drug use. They may also experience a marked decline in self-esteem, issues related to their social and emotional development, and an increased need to develop strong social relationships with their peer group (Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005).

The goal is to create a *school home* environment where the primary focus is developing a caring school culture that encourages students to share their voice, develop ownership in their school, and establish a connection to the campus that translates to better attendance, improved academic performance, and a decrease in student discipline (Dodd, 2000). Incorporating a student recognition program into the ninth-grade campus can impact student success. Student recognition programs that focus on academic achievement as well as improvement in attendance and behavior should be included in ninth-grade campus programs. A caring, positive, and supportive school culture can lead to healthy adolescent development and be instrumental in creating an environment so the social, emotional, and academic needs of each and every ninth-grade student can be adequately met (Eccles, 2004).

Summary

As shown by the review of the literature, the time of transition from middle school to high school can be stressful and unnerving for ninth graders. As many as 6% of America's high school students drop out within the first two years of high school (Owings, 2012). In addition, only 68% of students who enter high school as freshmen finish all the required credits to receive a high school diploma (Steinberg, 2002). To address the unique academic, social, and emotional needs of students as they transition from middle school to high school, school districts have responded by establishing ninth-grade centers or SLCs within the larger high school. Further, the transition from middle school into high school is an ongoing challenge for students and staff. High schools across the nation have experienced a significant increase in discipline issues, poor attendance, and academic failures with students in their freshman class (Habeeb, 2013). Even students who previously did well in school can become disengaged during this time.

Due to these and other potentially critical events in the lives of adolescent students, they tend to encounter a greater intensity of social, emotional, and academic issues during the first year of high school. Some students may decide to leave school, leading to an increase in the student dropout rate of the school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). This influx of high school dropouts is a concern for campus and district administrators as they strive to prepare students to be successful in an ever-changing global society (Waden, 2011). Concentrating on the transition to high school and strategically focusing on the unique needs of ninth graders may assist school and district leaders in laying a positive foundation for ninth-grade students so they can successfully graduate from high school.

At both the campus and district levels, school leaders who are interested in transforming education recognize the importance of a successful high school transition. Preliminary research

reveals when freshman students experience levels of success during their ninth-grade year, they carry that successful experience forward (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Similar levels of success continue to occur for those students throughout their high school career and subsequently lead to a successful graduation from high school (Fields, 2005). This understanding has caused school district administrators to rethink the ninth-grade school year and the overall ninth-grade experience. Neild (2009) claimed that “the freshman year is a time of increased risk for students” (p. 544); therefore, if we pay special attention to this transition, more students may be able to achieve success at the high school level. The purpose of this study was to identify best practices school administrators employ as they open and sustain a ninth-grade campus or center. In Chapter 3, the methodology of the study used to achieve this purpose is explained.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The emphasis on school improvement and the desire to create a school environment that successfully meets the needs of all students has placed a greater emphasis on developing appropriate transition programs for secondary students. This need has required school and district administrators to consider various transition options, including ninth-grade centers. This chapter includes the methodology used to conduct this qualitative study focused on ninth-grade centers. The research questions provide direction to the study. This chapter includes a graphic model and explanation of the research design, a discussion of the population sampling, and a detailed description of the research site. An explanation of the data collection tools and strategies, a description of the data analysis strategies, a comprehensive explanation of the limitations of the study, and an overall explanation of this study are also described in this chapter.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was twofold: (a) to examine administrators' strategies and practices in creating and implementing ninth-grade centers, and (b) to examine the strategies and practices related to students' academic performance and social and emotional well-being. It is important to observe those strategies being implemented within ninth-grade centers and that have a positive impact on ninth-grade students' academic performance. By better understanding these strategies, current and aspiring school leaders can benefit from best practices and incorporate those practices within their school districts. In-depth, individual interviews and a focus-group interview were conducted to discover the campus and district actions staff members identified as most important in the development of a successful transition program for ninth graders. Additional data related to ninth graders' attendance and grades during the first

year of high school were used as another layer in this study.

Research Questions

Three research questions were used to guide me in conducting this study:

1. What processes do district and campus level administrators use to create a ninth-grade center?
2. What components of the ninth-grade center have the greatest impact on student success?
3. What perceptions do staff have regarding the process of students transitioning from middle school to the ninth grade?

Research Design

To gain an understanding of the practices used by administrators to create ninth-grade centers, as well as the strategies related to ninth graders' social and emotional well-being, a descriptive qualitative case study research design was utilized. Participants' perceptions of ninth-grade centers were explored. In this section, an overview of, rationale for, and appropriateness of the research design and approach are provided.

Qualitative Research Approach Rationale

Qualitative research is empirical research where the collected data and the findings are not presented in the form of numbers (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research is grounded in an "interpretivist philosophy and aims to produce rounded understandings on the basis of rich, contextual, and detailed data" (p. 23). Creswell (2008) identified six steps in conducting a qualitative research study: (a) identification of the research problem, (b) comprehensive review of the literature, (c) establishing a purpose for research, (d) collection of data, (e) analysis of the data, and finally (f) reporting the evaluation of the research. This qualitative case study was constructed around these six steps.

A qualitative case study approach to research allows the researcher to collect data within familiar conditions (Stake, 2010). Stake (2005) described a case study design as a process in which both inquiry about the case and the product of the inquiry are developed. Yin (2003) claimed that a case study research design facilitates the researcher's efforts to present data that "explains how events occurred and reflects a cause and effect relationship" (p. 5). Case study research is preferred when examining contemporary events within a real-life context where the researcher collects a variety of data to yield information (Creswell, 2008). A qualitative research design does not work to confirm or disconfirm a hypothesis, but it identifies common themes revealed from the collection of data in the natural setting (Creswell, 2014). Braun and Clarke (2006) defined a theme as capturing a significant element of the data collected as it relates to one of the research questions and more specifically that it represents a "level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 80).

A qualitative case study research design served as the most appropriate research method for this study as it enabled me to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the processes and components that need to be in place to implement a ninth-grade center. It also provided an avenue for identifying policies and practices that support students' transition to high school. Examining the impact that the implementation of a ninth-grade center to facilitate students' social and emotional well-being and identifying the potential impact that administrators' recruitment and training efforts and teachers' perceptions of students making the transition to high school had on ninth-grade students' school success was of particular interest. As stated by Yin (2014), a case study research design allows the researcher to investigate "a contemporary phenomenon in depth and in its real-world context" (p. 237). Since this study was conducted in real time, when the actual transition and ninth-grade center were being implemented, the findings

that emerged from this study may inform the studied school district and other school districts of the next steps they might take to refine and/or improve how they support ninth-grade students as they transition from middle school to high school. In regard to areas of focus for future practice, findings from this study further inform school district and campus-based administrators about how the implementation and sustainability of ninth-grade centers could have an impact on students' academic performance and their social and emotional development.

A qualitative case study research design and approach allowed me to examine the specific issues surrounding the various processes and components of ninth-grade centers and the transition to high school, at the macro level. The choice to utilize a qualitative case study research design and approach enabled me to gain a clearer picture of the processes, components, perceptions, and strategies that were investigated in this study (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

Descriptive Qualitative Case Study Research Design

A descriptive case study is used to describe an intervention or practice in the setting in which it occurred and provide answers to a series of questions based on theoretical constructs (Yin, 2003). A descriptive case study was selected for two reasons. First, the main purpose of this research was to develop an understanding of the types of leadership supports needed for the development and implementation of a successful ninth-grade campus. Second, descriptive case studies answer questions based on a theory. The descriptions of leadership identified throughout the research process help to define the theoretical constructs under which a successful ninth-grade campus will operate.

To collect the data for this study, I relied on two major data sources. The first source of data was derived from one-on-one interviews with staff members whose roles directly impact high school transition. The second source of data was generated via a focus-group interview

with a core group of teachers and one counselor who were directly involved in the ninth-grade center. Using individual and focus-group interview protocols, participants were asked to share their perceptions regarding the process of students transitioning from middle school to the ninth grade, based on their experiences. The focus-group participants' responses provided a platform for identifying the best practices of school leaders as they relate to ninth-graders' transition to high school. The qualitative data yielded valuable information that allowed me, as the researcher, to better understand the elements and program components that are more likely to result in a successful ninth-grade transition program. The data collected from both measures were analyzed and common themes were identified and reported. Two outside sources were used to review the coding and confirm interrater reliability. These sources were individuals who received their doctorate degrees by completing qualitative studies and had extensive experience in the area of qualitative research.

The interviews were conducted on the ninth-grade campus, in the natural setting of the participants, to provide them the most comfort and ease when responding to the in-depth interview questions and participating in the focus-group interview. Refreshments, water, frequent breaks, and a quiet space was provided for each interview. A sign was placed on the outside of the door asking for the participant(s) and the facilitator not to be disturbed during the focus-group and in-depth individual interviews.

Figure 2 offers a visual overview of the elements of the study and the various stages of the research process that occurred throughout this qualitative case study. The next section provides the background, selection, and description of the research site; the selection process used to recruit and select the participants; and an overview of the individuals who participated in the study.

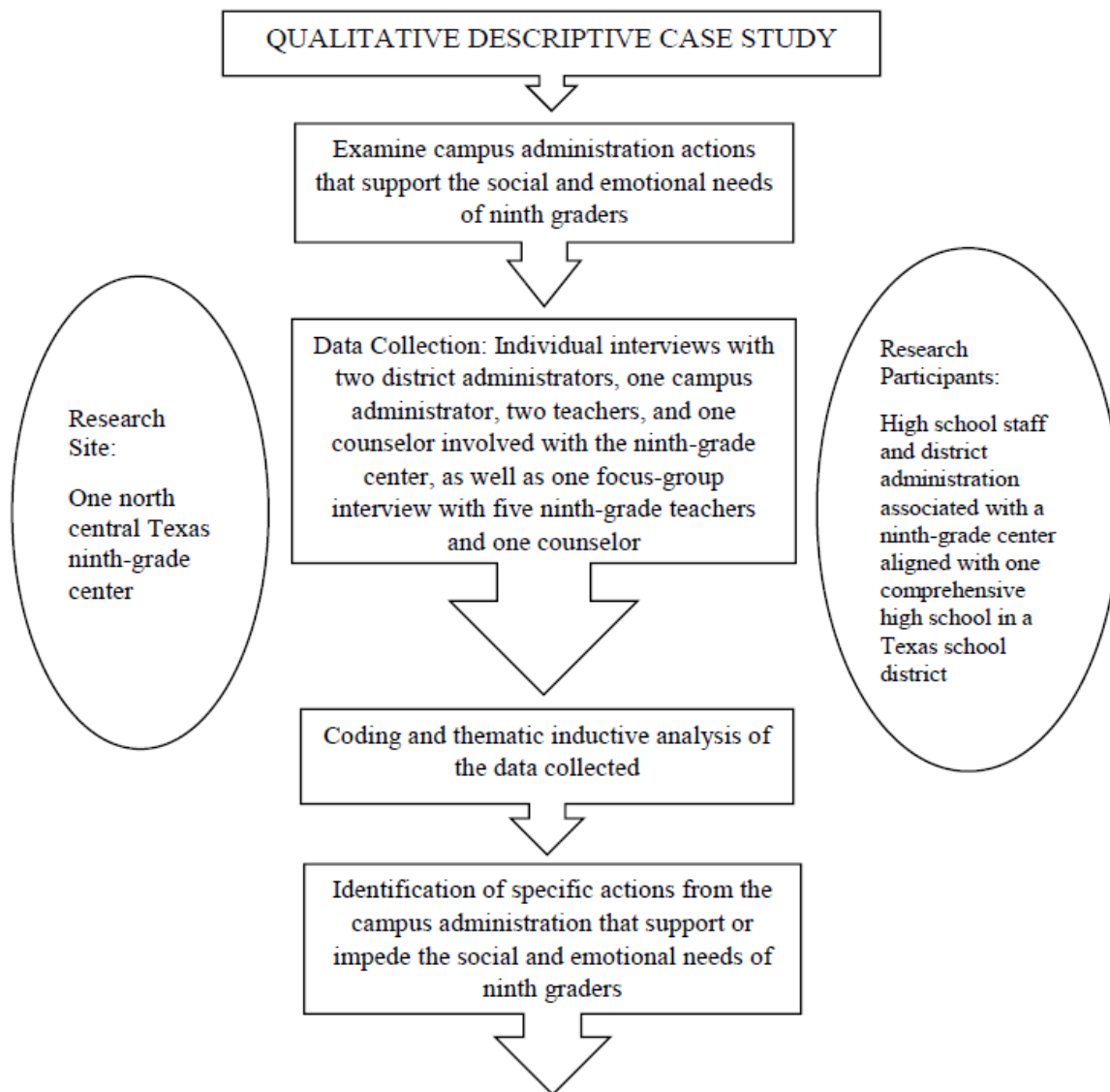


Figure 2. This research design graphically illustrates how this study was conducted. The design includes the qualitative elements of the study.

The Research Site

The unit of analysis for this qualitative descriptive case study was a single instrumental case representing a critical case, as defined by Yin (2014). A critical case study is appropriate when conducting research where the objective is to provide an in-depth description of phenomena. While the unit of analysis for this description case study was one ninth-grade school in one public school system, results from the findings may inform a larger population of

public school leaders within a large suburban school district with a demographic profile similar to the district studied.

Background of the Research Site

This qualitative descriptive case study was conducted at an independent suburban school district in the north Texas area. As of September 2018, the total enrollment of the school district in grades pre-kindergarten through 12 was almost 13,000. The district had a 97% graduation rate and consistently achieved high ratings at both the district and campus levels, based on accountability indicators set forth by the Texas Education Agency. Although most of the students in the district were meeting the grade-level minimum standard on state assessments, there was a focus by the district, as stated in the District Improvement Plan (DIP) posted on the school district's website, to close the achievement gaps of selected sub population groups of students in the areas of reading and mathematics.

During the 2014-2015 school year, a facilities committee consisting of two school board members, parents, community members, students, and staff was formed to study and address the long-term facility needs of the research site due to the potential for significant growth in student enrollment in the district. The charge of this committee was to examine all district campuses, review current and projected enrollment data, and make recommendations to the school board and district regarding future facility plans for the district to address future student growth. In addition to committee members, the group conducted several campus visits to tour facilities and assess potential needs. The committee was given background information regarding demographic enrollment projections, enrollment history and trends, future housing developments, current facilities, campus preferred capacities, and feedback from community and staff. The committee was also given student data for the past five years to review trends in

attendance, discipline, and academic performance. Of particular note was the difficulty many freshman students experienced as they transitioned from middle school to high school.

Committee members were led by members of the district curriculum team through several exercises encouraging them to think in terms of future models for learning. In addition, the curriculum team facilitated a brainstorming exercise that focused primarily on facility solutions for the high school. This activity created 20 different options for discussion. As a result of this process, an area architect and design firm presented five facility feasibility options as they related to planning for future secondary needs. One of those options was creating a ninth-grade center. The work of this committee yielded the following recommendations: add another elementary school and create a ninth-grade center to alleviate overcrowding issues at the high school level. At the time of the study, the high school's enrollment was almost 4,000 students. The capacity of the high school is around 3,500. The high school solution was granted as a top priority, as the enrollment at the high school was projected to be over 4,500 within the next three years. The option to open a separate ninth-grade campus would allow the district to create more space at the high school and focus on the unique needs of ninth graders in the areas of academics, behavior, and social and emotional support.

The Board of Trustees recommended and approved the creation of a ninth-grade center to open during the 2018-2019 school year. The ninth-grade center would be a separate campus from the main high school, but ninth graders would be bussed to the main high school in order to participate in athletics, choir, band, and other extra-curricular activities. There also would be the expectation that staff members would travel between the ninth-grade center and the main campus in an effort to provide instructional support and advanced course offerings for students who were ready to enroll in advanced courses. In addition to these changes, the high school schedule was

converted from a seven-period school day with 55-minute classes, to an A/B block schedule with four classes on A days and four classes on B days. Each class period would last 90 for minutes. Based on need or at the request of the campus administration, some courses would be double-blocked, meaning these courses would be offered on both A and B schedule days.

Selection and Description of the Research Site

When this study was conducted, the district had 10 elementary schools, three middle schools, one ninth-grade center, and two high schools. At one high school, a choice high school, students are expected to complete an application and orientation process to be able to attend. The choice high school had approximately 350 students in grades 9 through 12 and served as a small learning community for the students in attendance, with the primary focus of instructional delivery through project-based learning. If students did not choose to attend the choice high school, they attended the other school, a comprehensive high school. The comprehensive high school served approximately 2,700 students in grades 10 through 12 and was aligned with a ninth-grade center with a student enrollment of approximately 900 students.

This district was purposely selected as the research site because it had a ninth-grade campus associated with the main high school. The ninth-grade campus had approximately 900 students and was in its first year of existence. Prior to the opening of the ninth-grade campus, freshman students attended the main high school with students in tenth through twelfth grades. The ninth-grade center, aligned with the comprehensive high school, was the focus of this study.

The ninth-grade campus, located in a separate building and on a site separate from the main high school, staffed its own administrative and counseling team as well as a full teaching and coaching staff. Table 2 provides additional information related to the research site, including information related to the student demographics at the ninth-grade center.

Table 2

Overview of the Research Site

	Characteristic	%
Student Ethnicity	Asian	>45%
	White	>30%
	Hispanic	>10%
	Black/African American	< 5%
	Two or more races	< 5%
	American Indian/Alaskan Native	< 1%
	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	< 1%
Special Programs	English as a Second Language	< 10%
	Special Education	< 10%
	Gifted and Talented	>15%
	Free and Reduced Lunch	< 10%
Gender	Female	< 50%
	Male	>50%

Population and Sample

The main goal of a researcher, when choosing to derive a research sample via a purposive selection process, stems from his or her desire to select individuals who are vital for testing theories in relation to the researcher's study (Maxwell, 2005). Selecting participants is dependent upon the information they provide through their participation in the study and what they may be able to contribute to its overall purpose and outcome.

Selection and Description of the Participants in the Study

The participants in this study were purposely selected. Because of the small sample size,

it was necessary to select participants from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Therefore, participants were selected based on their years of experience, role in the district, teaching assignment, direct involvement in the creation and implementation of the ninth-grade center, and the unique and thorough insights and perspectives they could bring to the study, based on their own experiences and context. In regard to the selected participants' ability to contribute their insights and perspectives related to the transition of the district's ninth-grade students from middle school to high school, and the recording of their insights and perspectives, Creswell and Miller (2000) referred to this as "thick description" (p. 127).

Participants for this study fell into three categories: teachers, counselors, and administrators. Each of the participants' roles were deemed relevant to the operation of the ninth-grade center. District-level administrators whose roles were directly related to various aspects of the ninth-grade center were asked to participate. Teacher participants were individuals with a minimum of two years of high school teaching experience. Administrator and counselor participants were individuals with at least three years of experience in administration or counseling at the secondary level.

Seven high school teachers were involved in the study. Two of the seven were interviewed individually and the other five were asked to participate in a focus-group interview. The one-on-one and focus-group interviews were moderated by an external facilitator with no affiliation to the district. Three administrators participated in the study by completing individual interviews. One administrator was the principal at the ninth-grade center during the time of the study, while the other two administrators held district-level positions that provided support to the ninth-grade center administrators, teachers, and staff. The two district-level administrators held the titles of Executive Director of Teaching and Learning and Assistant Superintendent for

Administrative Services. Additional staff members who participated were counselors who worked directly with the students and teachers at the ninth-grade center. One of the counselors was asked to participate in the focus-group interview and the other counselor completed an individual interview. Participation in the study presented minimal risk to the participants who were interviewed. Table 3 provides specific information about the participants, including the category of each participant and the number involved in each data collection strategy.

Table 3

Research Participant Categories

Category	Campus	District	Position	Focus Group	Interview
Teachers (7)	High School		Ninth-grade teacher	5	2
	High School		Principal		1
Administrator (3)		Central Office	Executive Director of Teaching and Learning		1
		Central Office	Assistant Superintendent for Administrative Services		1
Additional Staff (2)	High School		Counselor	1	1

Recruitment of Participants

Although the teachers, counselors, and administrators from the research setting were asked to participate in the study, they were given the opportunity to decline participation. To introduce the potential participants to the study, I attended a faculty meeting held at the ninth-grade center. Attendees were assured that I, as one of the employees at the research site, would not participate in the focus-group or individual interviews and would only read the transcription

of the audio-recordings of those events, to protect their identity. I informed the attendees that a trusted and approved external facilitator would moderate the focus-group interview and would conduct the individual in-depth interviews. The external facilitator sent a follow-up email to the staff to introduce herself, the purpose of the study, and details about the data collection protocols. Each potential participant was informed that their participation was voluntary. The external facilitator ensured that individuals would be given an opportunity to ask questions and express concerns prior to participation in the study. I worked through the external facilitator to answer the participant's questions or concerns. For the district-level administrators, I attended a district meeting to provide a brief description of the study. I followed the same procedure for the ninth-grade campus, with a follow-up email from the external facilitator sent to each potential administrator participant, restating the purpose of the study, information about the interview, and information about who they could contact should they have any further questions or concerns. The email detailed the purpose, benefits, and risks of the study, as well as the recipient's ability to discontinue participation in the study at any time.

In addition to the teachers, counselors, and principal from the ninth-grade center who were invited to participate in the study, participants also included district administrators. These district administrators had experience in working with or supporting the ninth-grade center and/or had current knowledge or previous experience working with a ninth-grade campus. As the researcher, I provided a detailed explanation of the study at an administrative staff meeting. At this meeting, I explained that an external person would conduct the interviews to protect their identity. Their participation was on a voluntary basis with the option to decline participation at any time. Documents signifying that the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of North Texas (see Appendix A) were provided to all participants.

Data Collection Tools

Prior to the beginning of this study, I completed all required paperwork with the district selected for the study by obtaining consent to interview the participants, individually or through a focus-group interview, conducted by an external facilitator. Additionally, approval was obtained from the University of North Texas IRB for all aspects of the study, including the data collection procedures. The primary method used to gather data was face-to-face, in-depth interviews with teachers, administrators, and one counselor; however, a focus-group interview was conducted as part of the data collection process. The focus group consisted of five teachers and one counselor.

Most, if not all, data collected in a qualitative study are acquired through the use of interviews (Merriam, 2009). The most common interview protocol follows a dialogue-type format whereby the participants are asked to respond to pre-determined questions in the form of a person-to-person exchange with the interviewer. A major strength of a descriptive case study is the ability to gather data from different sources (Yin, 2014). As a result, I collected data from the focus-group interview, in-depth interviews, the facilitator's notes, and additional student data. Prior to conducting the focus-group and individual interviews, each participant was given the chance to review the IRB approval form and a copy of the consent form, a requirement of the need for individuals to be fully informed in order to determine whether they want to participate in the study. Each participant signed the consent form prior to the focus-group interview (Appendix B) or the individual in-depth interviews (Appendix C).

The in-depth individual interviews had one protocol for teachers and the counselor (Appendix D) that differed from the protocol for administrators (Appendix E). A separate protocol was used to guide the discussion among the individuals who participated in the focus-

group interview (Appendix F). The questions contained in the interview protocols were designed to elicit response data that would inform the three research questions guiding this study. In designing interview questions, it is essential the questions are worded in a way that the interviewer is able to extract the information desired from the interviewee with minimal probing or prompting (Merriman, 2009). However, the external interviewer utilized additional probes, when necessary, to clarify, extract additional information, and gain a better understanding of participants' overall responses to each question. Both the focus group and individual interview protocols followed an open-ended format in order to give each participant an ample opportunity to respond to each question. The open-ended format allows for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the topic and the ability for participants to provide a more robust response to the questions (Merriman, 2009).

Focus-Group Interview Protocol

The purpose of the focus-group interview was to elicit teacher and counselor feedback and perspectives related to the design, organization, and implementation of the ninth-grade campus. Hesse-Biber (2017) promoted the use of a focus-group interview for data collection as this method allows a researcher to hear from several participants at once on topics related to the study. The focus-group interview protocol consisted of 10 open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' responses specific to answering the research questions guiding this study. According to Merriam (2009), it is impossible to design probes ahead of time as they depend on how the interviewee answers each question. Maxwell (2005) noted the need for the focus-group interview protocol to consist of specific questions related to events and actions rather than "posing questions that elicit only generalizations or abstract opinions" (p. 103). Therefore, questions for the individual and focus- group interview protocols were written with the objective

to solicit responses to the three research questions guiding this study. Therefore, each of the focus-group interview questions were aligned to correlate with each research question (Appendix G). The focus-group interview protocol allowed the moderator to ask additional questions and/or probe for additional information or examples for clarification purposes and/or to offer more detail relevant to each question.

The focus-group interview was expected to be approximately 90 minutes; however, the actual length of the interview was approximately 60 minutes. The focus group was comprised of a group of five teachers and one counselor. The decision to not include campus and district administrators in the focus group was purposeful. In making this decision, it was important to provide the teachers and counselor focus-group participants the opportunity to speak freely regarding their opinions about the ninth-grade center. All six participants met the minimum experience requirement and were from the ninth-grade campus; however, a concerted effort was made to solicit teachers who taught a variety of content-related courses so that the participants were not from the same department. Consequently, one mathematics teacher, one science teacher, one English teacher, and one social studies teacher were asked to participate.

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

The semi-structured individual interview process utilized a set of researcher-designed protocols based on each participant's position at the research site. The administrator's interview protocol consisted of 10 questions while the teachers' and counselor interview protocol contained eight questions. The questions were customized for the participants, depending upon their role at the campus or with the district. The interview protocol included open-ended questions or statements designed to elicit participants' responses specific to answering the research questions guiding this study. Each in-depth individual interview question was aligned

to correlate with each research question guiding this study (Appendix H). A semi-structured interview protocol provided the option to (a) ask additional questions, (b) probe for additional information or examples for clarification purposes, and/or (c) offer more detail relevant to each question. The length of each in-depth interview was expected to be approximately 60 minutes; however, the average length of each in-depth interview lasted approximately 40 minutes.

Some of the interview questions focused on strategies and practices that teachers, administrators, and support staff used to transition and support ninth-grade students when they entered high school, as well as what strategies and practices they were using to support these same students as they continued through the first semester of their ninth-grade year. Additional questions asked participants to talk about their beliefs or expectations regarding the types of academic, social, and other changes they believed might occur during the transition from middle school to high school and to indicate which changes they believed had already started to occur since they joined the staff at the ninth-grade center. Through probing, the participants were also asked to share feedback on some areas of the ninth-grade transition that might not be achieving the desired goals.

Additional Student Data

The strength of a qualitative approach, first and foremost, lies in its triangulation capabilities since more than one method is utilized to study the same research question. The primary sources of data collection in the current qualitative descriptive case study were the focus-group and individual interviews; however, additional data tools were utilized during the study. These included an overall view of the annual attendance records and summary of designated final course report card grades of ninth graders during the first year of high school. The reviewed final report card grades summary included grades below a 70 in mathematics,

science, English, social studies, and fine arts. The reviewed attendance reports and data were accessed from the district website. The overall final grade report summary was provided by the district's data department. These additional data served as another layer to gain an overall view of the ninth-graders' academic success during their first year of high school.

Data Collection Procedures

To gain an understanding of participants' perceptions regarding the transition process from middle school to ninth grade and to identify the specific challenges that administrative leaders faced when implementing the ninth-grade center, focus-group and individual in-depth interviews were conducted. Hesse-Biber (2017) noted that qualitative researchers seek to discover the answers to specific questions and the researcher's goal is to extract meaning from what he or she has discovered. Qualitative research is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It is a comprehensive approach requiring the researcher to follow procedures and protocols; make connections; and determine whether a relationship might exist between the data, themes, and trends embedded in the data and the theory. Emerging questions and procedures, data collection, and data analysis help the researcher formulate general themes as he or she seeks to interpret the data and determine the meaning of the data from the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2014).

To provide trustworthiness concerning the study, the integrity of the data-collection process, protection of the research participants, and a greater likelihood that the participants would feel comfortable chronicling their experiences and answering each question honestly without being influenced by the researcher, an outside facilitator was used to conduct the interviews and to moderate the focus-group interview. The external facilitator has experience with qualitative research, completed the National Institutes of Health's online course and certification process, and was approved by the University of North Texas' Institutional Review

Board. This person facilitated obtaining the consent to participate signatures prior to the focus-group and in-depth interviews. The external facilitator was responsible for asking questions, managing the time, ensuring the recording was accurate, and allowing each participant the opportunity to share, as suggested by Stringer (2014). Since I was not present for the interviews, the external facilitator's presence was beneficial to me, the researcher, as she was able to detect any verbal or nonverbal actions that may have detracted from the likelihood that each participant provided an honest and truthful response. Her notes and transcriptions during the focus-group and in-depth interviews served as a valuable resource when reviewing the data.

Each interview took place after school hours in a conference room near the front office at the ninth-grade campus. Each participant was asked to select a pseudonym from a list provided by the external facilitator, prior to the focus-group and in-depth interviews. The pseudonym was used to protect the participant's anonymity. Participants were asked to refer to themselves by their pseudonym when responding to a question posed by the facilitator, to protect their identity in the audio recordings. The facilitator also used the pseudonyms when referring to the participants during the focus-group and in-depth interviews as well as in her hand-written notes. The original recordings of each interview and any supporting documentation are kept in the major professor's office in a locked cabinet and maintained on a password-protected laptop computer. All identifying information was removed. The data collection and analysis process are finished and the study is complete; nevertheless, the recordings and supporting documents will be retained in the current secure location for the federally required three years, then will be destroyed.

The interviews took place during the fall semester of the 2018-2019 school year. Table 4 details the timeline used for the collection of data and the method of data collection. It breaks

down each component of the study as it relates to participants (teachers, administrators, and counselors) and the data collection and procedures. Teachers and counselors were asked to participate in both the individual in-depth interviews and focus-group interview; however, the administrators who participated in the study were only interviewed individually. Administrators were not asked to be included in the focus group. This decision was intentional as to not have teachers' responses influenced by the presence of an administrator during the focus group. Individuals who participated in the focus-group interview were teachers and a counselor from the ninth-grade campus.

Table 4

Collection of Data – X Ninth-Grade Center in X ISD

Date	Teachers/Other Staff	Administrators
November 2018	Focus-Group Interview	
December 2018	Individual Interviews	Individual Interviews

Hesse-Biber (2017) recommended establishing group norms at the onset of a focus group interview to allow all participants to participate and to enable the group interview to run smoothly. The external facilitator reviewed these norms as part of the directions of the process and moderated the discussion to allow for full participation without one individual dominating the discussion. A digital recorder was used to record all in-depth interviews and the focus-group interview. Additional notes from the external facilitator were handwritten throughout the in-depth interviews and the focus-group interview. Data triangulation was achieved through the facilitator's ongoing personal and direct observations of the participants and hand-written field notes, as well as my analysis of relevant documents. Field notes taken during observations can be beneficial in providing supplementary data about the participants and interactions during data

collection (Hesse-Biber, 2017). According to Maxwell (2005), data triangulation helps to reduce the potential risk that one's "conclusions will reflect only the systemic biases or limitations of a specific source or method" and permits the researcher "to gain a broader and more secure understanding of the issues" (pp. 93-94) being investigated.

Data Analysis Strategies

Data from all interviews were transcribed and analyzed for patterns and themes related to the three research questions guiding this study. With participant permission, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by Rev™. Rev™ provides a high level of security for the files and securely stores and transmits files using 128-bit Secured Sockets Layer (SSL) encryption. SSL is the standard security technology for establishing an encrypted link between a web server and a browser. SSL ensures all data passed between these sources will remain secure.

Data from the conducted in-depth interviews and focus-group interview were analyzed by strategically coding each of the interviews. As stated by Creswell (2014), "Coding is the process of organizing the data by taking the data gathered during the data collection, segmenting sentences or images into categories and labeling those categories with a term based on specific language used by the participant" (p. 198). A hybrid model of coding was used. Individual and focus-group interviews were coded by using initial and focused coding. The coding process began with initial a priori coding derived from the literature and based on the conceptual framework and the list of research questions. According to Charmaz (2014), a prior takes place at the beginning of coding and a starting list of pre-set or prefigured codes is generated by the researcher. According to Creswell (2008), the use of "prefigured codes" and/or categories tends to "limit the analysis to the prefigured codes" instead of "opening up the codes to reflect the views of participants in a traditional qualitative way" (p. 152). The initial coding process

correlates with focused coding, allowing the data collected to be assigned a more focused code, based on the initial coding's strength. Focused coding allows the researcher to zero in and search for significant initial codes which are then analytically synthesized and integrated into a larger list of codes. The researcher can then begin to make sense of categories within the initial coding data (Baralt, 2012; Charmaz, 2014).

In addition to initial and focused coding, another set of codes begins to emerge from the reading and analyzing of the data. These emergent codes are the ideas, concepts, and meanings that arise from the data and differ from the a priori codes (Creswell, 2008). Therefore, additional codes were added to the a priori coding structure, as they emerged during the analysis of the individual interviews and the focus-group interview. In order to establish the trustworthiness of the study and results (Morrow, 2005; White, Oelke, & Friesen, 2012), my dissertation chair and the external facilitator, each with doctorates and experience with qualitative studies, reviewed the interview transcripts and independently coded them for themes. The inter-rater reliability process was then followed to ensure the consistent and reliable coding of the data by the dissertation chair, external facilitator, and myself.

The dissertation chair and external facilitator assisted me in the data analysis and interpretation of findings portion of the study, with the goal of providing greater authenticity to the results (Morrow, 2005; White et al., 2012). The dissertation chair and external facilitator had prior experience in conducting qualitative research and were familiar with the tenets of the qualitative data analysis process. They also had extensive knowledge in public school administration and daily operations. They both examined portions of the interview responses and worked with me to code their responses into themes.

In order to further analyze the data, I utilized an abridged version of the Van Kaam Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data, as presented by Moustakas (1994). This process begins with the prerequisite step of bracketing or phenomenological reduction where the “researcher describes his own experience with the phenomenon of study, necessary in order to identify prejudgments and preconceptions” (p. 32). The next step involves an in-depth review of the transcripts followed by clustering statements into themes, discarding extraneous statements, ending with the emergent themes related to the study.

From this process, I used a three-coding system to analyze the data: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding provided the opportunity for me to conduct an initial analysis with a cursory review of the data. Axial coding helped me narrow the open codes and identify relationships within the open coding and consolidate initial and emergent codes in a focused and organized method, as suggested by Hays and Singh (2011). The final coding, selective coding, was used to provide a deeper understanding of the data. Hays and Singh described selective coding as the most complex type of coding whereby the researcher identifies patterns, sequences, and processes within the axial codes. All three coding techniques were used to analyze the data and organize the data into themes. Throughout the data analysis phase, the literature-based conceptual framework served as the principal focus to guide the process. The findings were analyzed through the filter of the conceptual framework and its three broad components. Conclusions about the supportive conditions for the successful development of ninth-grade centers were developed.

Limitations of the Study

While the data collected came from a relatively small sample at one ninth-grade campus in one Texas school district, the data were valuable; however, it is important to note that the

representation of statewide teacher and administrator perceptions and beliefs about a ninth-grade center may be incomplete. Because this study was conducted with only one school district, the results of this study may not be generalizable to any other ninth-grade center or institution. The results of a qualitative research design are dependent upon the interactions between the participants and the researcher assumes the participants provided honest, thoughtful responses to the interview and focus-group questions (Creswell, 2014). Nevertheless, some respondents may have had limited knowledge or prior experience in working with ninth graders or at a ninth-grade campus. Although an opportunity was provided to ask clarifying questions concerning vocabulary terms referenced in some of the interview questions, some participants may not have had an accurate understanding of the terms being used in the questions. This lack of prior knowledge could have resulted in participants' responses that may not represent their actual experience, perception, belief, or actions and, as a result, may not be relevant to one or more of the research questions.

This study was limited by the validity and reliability of the in-depth interviews and focus-group questions. Some participants, within their first two years of teaching, might have had limited experiences from which to draw when participating in the individual or focus-group interviews. Previous negative experiences in high school might have impacted the participants' ability to be objective. Additionally, some respondents might not have completely trusted that their participation in the study would not adversely affect their employment with the district and/or believed their anonymity would be protected. Every caution, however, was taken to mitigate potential negative effects of these limitations. The primary method used to mitigate any harmful effects was the use of an external facilitator who had no affiliation with the district. She was used to conduct the individual in-depth interviews and moderate the focus-group interview.

In the next section, the ethical considerations of this study are explained, revealing the strategies used to protect the research participants throughout each stage of the research process, assist me as the researcher in remaining objective, and minimize any potential risks to the individuals who volunteered to participate in the study.

Ethical Considerations

Because this study involved human participants, the guidelines and procedures set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of North Texas were followed. My completion of the National Institutes of Health's online course and certification process ensured that I understood participant protection. All participants were assured of confidentiality in the reporting of results. Pseudonyms were used in place of the school district, the participants, and any other potential identifiable information. For example, the school name was not identified. The school district and individual participants within the school district were kept confidential. Each participant signed a consent form ensuring his or her confidentiality and willingness to voluntarily participate in the study. Approval from the district and campus administration was secured before the data were collected.

The participants in the focus-group interview self-selected a pseudonym and were referred to by that pseudonym, rather than by name, to protect their anonymity. During the focus-group interview, participants wore a name tag with their pseudonym. Whenever a participant made a comment or referred to another participant's comment, they used their pseudonym in place of their actual name. This procedure was helpful during the recording process as only pseudonyms were recorded, not actual participant's names. The audio recording of the focus-group interview was transcribed by an outside transcription service, Rev™. I did not review the audio recordings, only the transcriptions of the recordings, to avoid any

identification of participants by voice. The transcription of the recordings was the only form of data made available to me, collected during the focus-group and the in-depth interviews, thus protecting the anonymity of each participant. The external facilitator also conducted the in-depth individual interviews. An audio recording of each in-depth interview was transcribed by Rev™ and the same process was followed to protect participant anonymity. I did not review the audio recordings of the in-depth individual interviews, only the transcription of these interviews.

As the researcher, I analyzed the collected data. I also received assistance from my dissertation chair and the external facilitator who moderated the focus-group interview and conducted the in-depth interviews. I sought the assistance of the external facilitator because of my close association to the research site. In general, objectivity can be an obstacle in qualitative studies (Tufford & Newman, 2010). It was critical that I used every possible means to bracket my experiences throughout the entire process and to assure that any potential preconceptions on my part would not impact my interpretation of the data and reporting of the overall findings and results of this study. Bracketing is a method used in qualitative studies to mitigate potential effects of presumptions on the part of the researcher that might taint the findings (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Bracketing assists the researcher with establishing a higher level of objectivity, particularly if the researcher has close ties to the research topic, subjects, or research site (Gearing, 2004; Hoskins & White, 2012).

Because of the close relationship between the researcher and the research topic, bracketing also helps the researcher examine what may be emotionally challenging material derived from the research. Bracketing allows for researchers to put borders around their own experiences to filter out their bias in an effort to be objective with the research (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Phenomenology is a qualitative research method used to describe how human

beings experience a certain phenomenon. Bracketing helps to alleviate any preconceived ideas on the part of the researcher (Hoskins & White, 2012). I used bracketing to distance myself from the findings and maintain a level of objectivity by focusing on the outcomes of the study.

Summary

The methodology employed in this study are outlined in this chapter. Data collection and data-analysis procedures are detailed as well. This qualitative descriptive case study was comprised of a focus-group interview and individual in-depth interviews, plus an analysis of pertinent documents related to summaries of student grades and attendance. Also explained in this chapter are the procedures integrated throughout this study to increase validity. Selection of participants and the design of research data collection tools aligned with the research questions and intention of the study. A literature-based framework guided the data analysis. The intention of this study was to collect practitioners' perceptions of the significant components of operating a ninth-grade center, to gather empirical data, applied toward evidence-based decisions, evaluating organizational structures, and enhancing existing programs that could affect the success of the students. The findings of this study may provide practitioners with information to be used when developing a ninth-grade campus in their district. Chapter 4 includes a report of the findings from each data source.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was two-fold. The primary purpose was to research and identify the supports and practices the campus and district used to implement a ninth-grade campus. The secondary purpose was to understand what encompasses a successful high school transition program and the impact it has on student success. Studies have shown that students in their first year of high school have a higher academic failure rate and suffer more social anxiety-related issues than in other grades of school (Black, 2008). To accomplish the purposes of this study, I explored the processes, supports, and practices employed by teachers, counselors, campus administrators, and district administrators to implement a ninth-grade center in an effort to ease students' transition from middle school to high school.

This chapter includes the findings from the qualitative descriptive case study; the findings are comprised of data collected from the focus-group and individual in-depth interviews, along with selected district student data, to answer the following research questions used to guide this study:

1. What processes do district and campus level administrators use to create a ninth-grade center?
2. What components of the ninth-grade center have the greatest impact on student success?
3. What perceptions do staff have regarding the process of students transitioning from middle school to the ninth grade?

The intent of the focus-group and individual in-depth interviews was to identify and gather information on the types of supports and practices that participants deemed necessary to implement a ninth-grade center. Data derived from the transcripts of focus-group and individual interviews and district documents were analyzed and synthesized into common emergent themes

(Merriam, 2009). Following an initial reading of all transcripts, a list of commonly used words or phrases was generated. These words or phrases were grouped into preliminary themes, based on frequency and commonalities and their relevance to the various components of the conceptual framework. In the discussion of each theme, direct quotes from the participants are presented to support the theme.

Table 5 reflects the participants who provided written consent to be included in the study, their gender, years of experience, position in the school district, whether or not they were a campus or central office employee, and the data collection type. Participants' years of experience ranged between 7 and 25 years with an approximate mean of 15 years of experience.

Table 5

Information Related to Participants of the Study

Pseudonym	Gender	Experience (Years)	Position	Location	Type
Gale	Male	9	Teacher	Campus	Interview
Loretta	Female	7	Teacher	Campus	Interview
Katherine	Female	7	Teacher	Campus	Focus Group
Clyde	Male	12	Teacher	Campus	Focus Group
Diana	Female	8	Teacher	Campus	Focus Group
Barbara	Female	16	Teacher	Campus	Focus Group
Helen	Female	24	Teacher	Campus	Focus Group
George	Male	13	Principal	Campus	Interview
Jackie	Female	22	Counselor	Campus	Interview
Alice	Female	19	Counselor	Campus	Focus Group
Nadia	Female	22	Administrator	Central Office	Interview
Naveen	Female	25	Administrator	Central Office	Interview

The teachers, counselors and campus administrator selected for the individual interviews and focus-group interview were all from the same ninth-grade campus. The two central office administrators were selected from the central administration building. Because of the relatively small sample size and to ensure confidentiality, each individual who participated in the interviews self-selected a pseudonym from a list provided to them by the external facilitator. Throughout the reported findings, each participant is referred to by his or her pseudonym.

The questions contained in the focus-group and individual in-depth interview protocols centered around campus and district leadership supports; successful transition practices used with the ninth graders; teacher recruitment and training, including the incorporation of professional learning communities; and the physical design and daily operations of the building, including the master schedule, grouping of teachers, and the campus bell schedule. The qualitative data provided a contemporary description of the various supports provided to ninth graders during their transition to high school. Additionally, district documents were inspected, as I was interested in a high-level view of the impact the administrator supports had on student grades and attendance. These additional student data consisted of the yearly attendance averages and an overall view of the final semester grades of ninth graders who scored less than 70, over a three-year period of time. A review of cumulative findings from multiple data sources allowed for triangulation of patterns and themes from the lived experiences of the participants of the study.

The findings are presented around the eight emergent themes. The emergent themes correlate to the three broader themes of the conceptual framework: (a) teacher recruitment and training of the teaching staff with an emphasis on the implementation of professional learning communities; (b) social and emotional needs of the ninth graders and processes used by the

campus to meet the ninth-graders' social and mental health needs; and (c) the physical design and overall structure of the building, including processes and procedural components of the educational facility that impact student success, as well as improvements to the overall facility that positively impacted ninth-graders' transition to high school. There was a significant correlation among the broad components of the study and the eight emergent themes. This correlation is identified throughout the reporting of the findings.

Data Analysis Process

Data analysis for this study commenced at the beginning stages of the data collection phase of this study, which included the facilitation of a focus-group interview, individual in-depth interviews, and an overview analysis of district data. Once the data were collected, I conducted an initial reading of all the transcripts from the individual interviews, the focus-group interview, and the district documents to create a list of commonly used words or phrases. Using such a holistic approach in the initial stages of the data analysis process, according to Hesse-Biber (2017), can assist with the overall organization of the data and provide a systematic process to use when beginning the coding process. This initial reading gave me a holistic impression of the overall content and general ideas that emerged and/or were articulated throughout the data.

Next, I used an open coding approach to assign codes to specific segments of the data. Those codes were clustered into preliminary themes based on likeness and frequency of use. To provide trustworthiness, interrater reliability, and triangulation of the study and results, two researchers with earned PhDs independently coded and reviewed the same data sources to generate a list of themes (Morrow, 2005; White et al., 2012). The result of the process reduced the initial list of 31 broad themes down to eight as similar themes were joined and an emergent

theme was identified. Themes that were deemed as smaller in significance were not considered.

Table 6 lists the three broad components from the conceptual framework and the eight correlated emergent themes, in addition to frequency tabulations.

Table 6

Emergent Themes and Frequencies

Conceptual Framework Components	Emergent Themes	Frequency
Teacher Recruitment/Training	Leadership	92
	Communication	89
	Professional learning	78
	Mission/vision	37
	Professional learning communities	24
	Onboarding	24
	Mentoring new staff	22
	Teacher collaboration	20
	Faculty meetings	18
	Staff input	18
	Shared beliefs	18
	Developing a vision	15
	Middle school experience	12
Curriculum	10	
Social and Emotional Needs of Students	Principal/leadership	80
	Professional learning	77
	Relationships	77
	Transition	75
	Smaller campus	58
	Student/adult mentors	52
	Character education/habitudes	55

(table continues)

Conceptual Framework Components	Emergent Themes	Frequency
	Stress/anxiety	40
	Self-advocacy	34
	Learner profile	32
	Caring	27
	Student input	22
	Counselors	18
Physical Design of the Facility	Campus/district leadership	73
	Separate facility	70
	Smaller learning environment	56
	Ninth-grade campus	24
	Involvement of stakeholders	43
	Communication	55
	Transition	40
	Alignment	27
	Setting vision/mission	28
	Class bonding	20
Collaborative/flexible spaces	18	

As previously stated, as part of the initial coding process, I reviewed all of the data to identify any significant patterns or trends. Several major themes emerged. Emergent themes with similar meanings were clustered together and combined into eight predominant themes: (1) campus leadership, (2) professional learning, (3) separate campus, (4) team building and relationships, (5) transition, (6) communication, (7) vision, and (8) stakeholders. These eight predominant themes and the corresponding number of coded references for each theme are provided in Table 7. The themes are sorted from the largest to the smallest number of

references, in the totals by theme column, to illustrate the hierarchy of the most dominant themes discussed by the participants.

Table 7

Coded References by Collapsed Theme

Collapsed Theme		Total by Theme
1	Campus leadership	245
2	Professional learning	199
3	Separate campus/facility	156
4	Team building; forming relationships	151
5	Transition	142
6	Communication	95
7	Set vision/mission	75
8	Involve stakeholders	63
<i>Total</i>		<i>1126</i>

The theme rankings shown in Tables 6 and 7 were then compared to confirm the validity of themes and to identify anomalies within the data. From Table 6, those themes with a coding frequency of less than 20, which could not be combined with an existing theme, were deemed not significant and were not included in the findings. These tables indicate that the top four predominant themes across all interviews were (1) campus leadership, (2) professional learning, (3) separate campus/facility, and (4) teambuilding and forming relationships.

Throughout the review of the data, several codes consistently occurred with overlap occurring between all subthemes. Most clearly, campus leadership emerged as a meta-theme, overlapping with a majority of the other codes. It was identified as a key factor in all three areas of the broad components of the conceptual framework. Professional learning, specifically the

type of training the teachers had received, was an additional theme, emphasized by the majority of participants.

During the coding process, key words or phrases were grouped together and organized under one of the eight emergent themes. As various participants used a variety of words or phrases with shared or similar meanings, these words were clustered together in relation to one of the eight emergent themes. Table 8 lists the key words or phrases participants used during the in-depth individual interviews or the focus-group interview, sorted by the eight emergent themes. Totals are provided to indicate how often one of the key words or phrases was used during the coding process.

Table 8

Key Words and Phrases Sorted by Theme

Emergent Themes	Key Words or Phrases	Totals
Campus leadership	Administrator, principal, assistant principal, campus principal, leader, instructional coach, instructional coach, helpful, experts, helper, role model	245
Professional learning	Staff development, training, professional learning, professional learning community, PLC, planning, working team, team planning, additional work days, flex days, instructional coaching opportunities, learning framework, teacher experience/expertise, onboarding	199
Separate campus/facility	Campus, facility, ninth-grade center, ninth-grade campus, XHS9, XHS, main campus, smaller learning community, separate space, collaborative space, flexible learning space, CTE center, media lab, smaller classes	156
Teambuilding; form relationships	Relationships, team, develop, collaboration, connections, encouraging, positivity, knowing students, mentoring, friends, less conflict, reduction in bullying, social awareness, mental health, healthy, build connections, teambuilding	151
Transition	Middle school to high school, move, change, vertical, grade level, unique, differences, “getting kids ready”, on-track, graduation, four-year plan, remediation, alignment	142
Communication	Visible, plan, mindful, opportunities, understanding, same page, listen, intentional, honesty, integrity, trustworthy, provide information, transparent, meetings, transparency, parents, discussions	95

(table continues)

via the focus-group and in-depth individual interviews and an examination of how the data address each of the three research questions.

Collectively, the participants of the study had instructional and administrative experiences totaling 160 years in public education, and spanned all levels of elementary, middle, and high school. Each participant brought their own unique perspective to the study, but there were marked overlaps and similarities in responses that correlated to the themes that emerged from the findings. These findings revealed multiple correlations and connections to the themes and the conceptual framework components.

Findings by Theme

This section presents the eight emergent themes relevant to strategies and practices the participants believed had the strongest impact on the successful creation and implementation of a ninth-grade center. The following discussion of the findings highlights the broad components of the conceptual framework and themes that emerged from the data analysis, as identified in Figure 6. The emergent themes are supported by data found in the additional student information. Each emergent theme was aligned to a component of the conceptual framework of the study. These components concerned practitioner perceptions of school district and campus support from the administrative level for the development and sustainability of a ninth-grade center.

Based on an analysis of the data acquired via the focus-group interview and individual interviews, both campus- and district-level participants supported the creation and implementation of the ninth-grade center. The design process the school district used to create the ninth-grade center was completed over a three-year time period. The participants' experience with this three-year process impacted their responses to each question. Those participants with

more in-depth knowledge of the design process gave more robust responses than those with limited experience; however, each participant’s responses provided important data which led to the eight emergent themes.

The emergent themes are presented as they correlate with the three broad components of the conceptual framework and the corresponding research question. Figure 5 displays the eight emergent themes as they align with each of the three broad components of the study. There is some duplication across the broad components as several themes that emerged apply to more than one broad component of the conceptual framework. For example, campus leadership emerged as significant for the broad component of teacher recruitment and training as well as the component of the physical design of the facility.

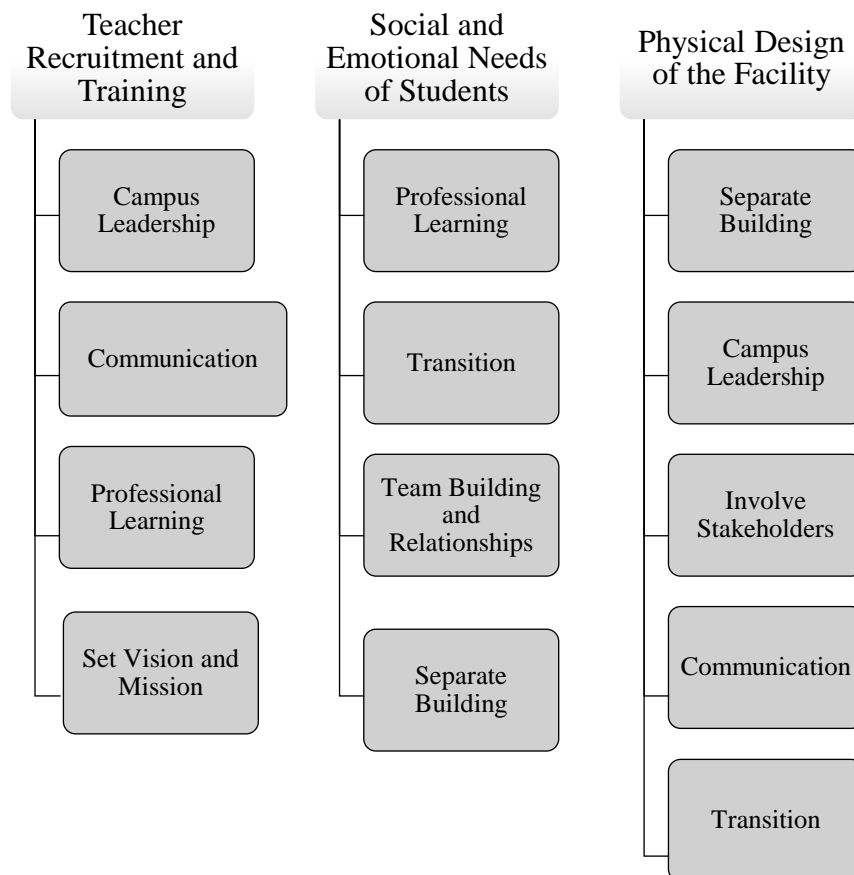


Figure 5. The eight emergent themes are grouped according to the conceptual framework components.

Campus Leadership

The data revealed multiple comments and statements related to the importance of strong campus leadership when developing a ninth-grade center. Overwhelmingly, the participants indicated the principal played a key role in the success of the ninth-grade center. The campus leadership influenced a multitude of areas, including (a) creating a sense of team by building relationships with students and staff, (b) involving stakeholders during the development and implementation of the ninth-grade campus, (c) selecting and training and staff, and (d) establishing and communicating the mission of vision of the campus. It was noted that hiring the principal a full academic school year prior to the opening of the ninth-grade center was a significant move by the central office administration. During the focus-group interview, Clyde, a teacher from the ninth-grade center, captured this sentiment in the following manner:

One thing that I am pleased about is they [central office staff] hired the principal a year in advance to give that person an opportunity to have a lot of input on the hiring of the people, structures for the building, and input on various elements including furniture, resources and various aspects of the building.

Throughout the study, major themes emerged regarding the importance of the campus leadership and the effect they have on the ninth graders' successful transition to high school, as well as the importance of visibility of the principal. During the focus-group interview, Barbara, one of the teachers in the study, noted that several times throughout the year prior to the opening of the center, the principal frequently visited each of the three middle schools to begin building relationships with the rising ninth graders.

I believe [the principal] attended each of the middle schools before the ninth-grade campus opened. Having an introduction to him before the year started. I think was important. He helped us set the tone of embracing them where they are and yet getting them ready to be successful. He was highly visible on the middle school campuses throughout the entire spring semester.

In regard to the campus leadership's impact on the broad theme of teacher recruitment

and training, Katherine, a teacher from the focus group, described the campus leadership as having a significant impact in this area.

I love how this district went about selecting the staff to work here. Our principal at the high school basically said whoever wants to go, fill out this Google Form so the ninth-grade principal would know who is interested. He literally met with each one of us, individually, and it was so personal. It got me excited and I couldn't wait to be here. He is so positive and all about creating relationships. He made me really feel like he wanted me at the ninth-grade campus and I thought, I am really gonna work hard for you.

Related to the district's involvement in the development of the ninth-grade center and specifically as that involvement relates to the campus leadership, during the in-depth interview, Naveen, a district administrator made this observation:

And so as we knew we were going to open up a ninth-grade campus, we took a lot of time really preplanning for what that was going to look like and I think one of the most important pieces in my role was being able to be a part of the identification of who the principal was going to be a year in advance of the campus opening.

On several occasions, visibility was noted by participants as an important factor of campus leadership. One of the teachers interviewed, Loretta, noted these observations about the campus and district leadership:

Our administration is incredibly transparent, visible, and they are very willing to sit down and talk with you. [Campus administrators] are all great. My expectations for campus support is I expect the administration to be available if we need something and they definitely are. District level, I don't see as much of, to be honest. I really don't...I couldn't tell you the names of a lot of our district people. The campus support has been very strong. District support has been a little lacking, I don't think on purpose. I just think kind of by nature, it's just been a little more separated.

All participants indicated that the campus leadership, specifically the building principal, was the most influential position in regard to the successful implementation of a ninth-grade center.

Professional Learning

Teacher training, recruitment, the role of professional learning communities, and teacher

preparation planning for the ninth-grade center were the professional learning areas most cited by participants. The influence of the principal and the role that position plays as the instructional leader responsible for leading the professional learning are critical. Designing meaning and engaging professional learning opportunities were cited as significant contributions to the implementation of the ninth-grade center. Professional learning was identified as a shared responsibility of both campus and district leadership. In his in-depth interview, George, the ninth-grade center principal, spoke about his involvement early on with professional learning and helping to shape the vision of the center.

So we went through the process of doing some visioning work. And so going through that process we were able to identify those that had expressed any interest in coming into the ninth-grade campus. Either from the main high school campus or one of the three middle schools. I then met individually with each of those educators and worked through the process of identifying who would come with us. And then we took a sampling of those educators as well as district administrators and other district personnel, about 30 in total. And we went through a design workshop with an outside facilitator and really started looking at things like what is our guiding purpose, what is the primary function of our existence? Why are we here? And then we looked at things such as if we were to define our culture in three words, what would those three words be? And then started identifying critical opportunities and some action steps that we could take to address those opportunities.

How and when professional learning occurred during the development of the ninth-grade center was also identified. One district administrator, Nadia, expressed in her in-depth interview the role the district played with staff training, as well as the additional planning and professional learning days that were provided to the staff prior to opening the ninth-grade center and the concern that adding an additional transition can have on the curriculum.

I think we supported the campus administrators in providing that training more than leading the training ourselves. And we supported some training he [the principal] did very early in the school year. [The campus principal] was provided five additional days with the staff and so again, we helped scaffold for that, and helped provide support as necessary for his vision. In terms of support or training that we did provide was around professional learning communities, and the alignment of courses and sequences, because we've created another transition, which was a concern in the development of this model.

We have high school credit courses offered at the middle school, same course offered here at the ninth-grade campus, same course offered at the main high school.

The teachers involved in the focus-group interview made a similar observation about the additional transition and the value of professional learning to support this additional transition.

Clyde shared the teacher perspective as follows:

I think going back to what was said earlier about having two transitions, eighth to ninth and ninth to tenth, the professional learning communities being in vertical alignment so that we are able to stay in contact with where they're coming from and where they're going, that would be a great opportunity to help them transition because as all stated, they do have two transitions in rapid succession. So leveraging what the person before you knows is definitely beneficial in making sure we're preparing for the next level as well.

As the professional learning piece includes the development of strong relationships between the teacher and students, Katherine, another teacher from the focus group added:

I agree that just like our whole PLC drive is that all of these ninth graders are our kids, not just the 150 that come through a specific door and so even though we're not truly teamed we take it upon all our responsibility to, as Diana said, is to give them all the same opportunities that any one student would have, now they all have that.

Additionally, the use of professional learning communities (PLCs) for analyzing student data and professional growth was noted by four staff members during their in-depth interviews.

The center's principal, both central office staff members, and one teacher all noted a heavy emphasis and importance placed on PLCs on the campus. One of the teachers interviewed noted:

I rely so heavily on my PLC group to provide me with support in working with my learners. We regularly review our assessments, analyze summative test responses, create formative assessments, and pinpoint target areas for student growth. I don't know what I ever did before I was a member of this PLC group. It has totally changed my way of teaching. It is invaluable.

Separate Campus/Facility

Having a separate campus/facility was expressed by participants as having both a positive and possible negative impact on the success of the ninth graders. The separate theme of the ninth-grade center was identified heavily during the focus-group interview. Diana, a teacher

from the ninth-grade center, stated that one of the positives about the separate size was the small environment and the ability to better develop relationships with her students. She commented:

I think a super meaningful thing is that we're just smaller than the main campus and I feel like I've been about to build connections with kids and I see more of my kids in the hallway. The high school is so large that I feel like I didn't get to see them, or I'd be hidden in a hallway and they would never come by to stop and just say hi so I feel like we've had that opportunity to really build those connections and to know them more.

Another positive element of the separate space was the physical design of the building.

Two years before opening the ninth-grade center, the district renovated a middle school and redesigned it as the ninth-grade center. This effort was noted by Katherine, a teacher, who stated:

I think the district did a fantastic job turning this middle school space physically into a high school campus, a ninth-grade center. As far as you know, the flexible learning areas, they just made it where it's not so middle schoolish, but yet it's not the big high school yet and just talking to the kids and even when the high school kids come back to this campus, like for a club meeting or whatever, they say, "it looks so modern" and they appreciate, I think, the kids do, that it was built for them and so I think that's something that a lot of the middle schoolers may have been feeling like, "Oh we're really going to another middle school" but they really weren't. They came to their own place, so it's meaningful.

One of the negative elements of a separate campus noted by two teachers during the focus-group interview related to course offerings only available at the main high school campus.

We both have students who travel to the main high school campus to take advanced courses only offered at XHS. The problem has come up with the shuttle. They are often late to our classes because they travel over to XHS for the advanced courses and they are both in band. I don't know what the answer is, but it's really been a problem this year.

On the other hand, Katherine, one of the teachers in the focus group, noted that creating a separate facility exclusively for ninth graders had the look and feel of actually being a ninth-grade center as opposed to replicating the physical features of a middle school campus. She commented:

I'm glad this doesn't look like a quote unquote middle school campus. I think the district did a fantastic job turning this physically into a high school campus, a true ninth-grade center. The flexible learning spaces, CTE center, new modern style furniture just made it where it's not so middle schoolish, but it's not the big high school either.

An additional negative aspect of being on a separate campus, more specifically where the center is located, was noted by Clyde during the focus-group interview:

Since our school really isn't in a neighborhood and our kids aren't driving yet, I've definitely seen a decrease in my kids that stay after school or come in after school to ask questions or before school, because they're not able to get here or there's traffic or they're taking the buses and the buses arrive late or whatever, so yeah, I don't like it. That's another design flaw in a way.

Both positive and negative aspects of being on a separate campus were identified in the focus-group interview and during the in-depth interviews.

Transition

The emergent theme of transition was revealed in all three research questions and overlapped with several of the emergent themes. The entire ninth-grade experience is associated with transitioning, so it is understandable that this emergent theme would be identified across other areas. In regard to the middle school to high school transition, the ninth-grade year is consumed with much emotion and some staff members were perceptive of the unique needs of this student group. Jackie, a counselor with 22 years of experience, had much to say about their perceptions and working with ninth graders. She stressed that:

From a perception standpoint, as a ninth grader, you don't want to stick out for not knowing what you're doing and looking stupid in front of your peers. There is already enough pressure coming into ninth grade and coming from different middle schools, just adapting to high school in general, that's when you remove upperclassmen from the mix and the transition will still be hard, but automatically gets a little easier with the older kids gone. It just removes a little of perceived scrutiny from the ninth graders themselves.

Another perception regarding high school transition related to course load and academic rigor, as well as the types of academic support provided by the teachers. District administrator

Nadia, shared her perceptions as follow:

One of the things that I have already experienced in my time with educators on this campus is because advanced courses, particularly advanced placement courses, are limited on this campus to just one. Which is good because a previous perception was that freshmen need to load up on advanced courses in order to stay competitive. Now you cannot take World Geography or Human Geography and World History simultaneously. Which is what sometimes we saw in the big building. What I am seeing is learners failing forward, in a really positive way. With a supportive group of educators, who can say, “Yes, you didn’t do well on the first document-based question, because you weren’t supposed to. It was the first one you’ve ever done. Did you pick up a guitar and play it well the first time you picked it up?” The educators and learners have this kind of community sense of we’re all in this together trying to figure out us, and who we are, and what learning is going to be for us.

One of the negatives, or challenges, of a separate building was identified by one of the teachers, Alice, who expressed concerns about the additional transition and the importance of communication throughout the process:

It’s a pretty big task, I think, to ask for one campus to do two transitions. It’s a big job. I think we can do it; I think we can be successful. It’s just making sure that we’re all on the same page. I think the main area of concern that I have is just communication. As far as the communication and how to transition is probably going to be the challenge moving forward with making sure that everybody, both principals and the campuses, are supportive of whatever policies and decisions are made because they impact not just one campus, but two.

Clyde, another teacher from the focus group, shared insights involving the separate building as it relates to teacher training:

I think one important thing, since we do as Katherine mentioned, we only have one year and it’s a critical year because being on a high school campus that is nine through 12, you have the vertical alignment built in with your ten through 12 partner teachers and I know sometimes it’s a little bit frustrating for the six through eight [grades] lack of vertical alignment that can occur so I hope that we’re mindful of that and that we make sure since we are a one-year piece of that vertical alignment that we keep those connections, improve them, six through eight, and make sure we keep them, 10 through 12.

Another teacher, who happened to also be a parent of a ninth-grade student, noted the separate campus had a negative impact in regard to resources, by commenting:

I am not only a teacher, but I have a son who attends school here too. He really wanted

to be on the solar car team because he is in engineering. The main solar car lab is at XHS, so he doesn't really get to use any of that equipment or the resources unless he goes there after school. It would be nice if our kids could have those resources here too.

The size of the center, having a smaller building, thus fewer students, was identified by one of the counselors, Jackie, as a positive element of the ninth-grade center:

I think the other thing is just a smaller campus. In a large nine through 12 grade high school, through nobody's fault, it's just easier for kids to slip through the cracks. It's easier for them to withdraw and isolate. And again, back to the social and emotional health and the crisis piece, we don't want our kids to disappear.

A similar comparison was made during one of the district staff member's interviews.

Being in a smaller campus with less learners and specifically only one grade level has been a game changer. At least I think it has been. Whenever I am on the campus and working with a group of educators, it just seems the kids are happier there.

The separate, smaller campus was seen as a positive factor by participants in both the focus-group interview and during individual interviews.

Teambuilding and Relationships

The responses of the participants made connections between the social and emotional needs of the students and the importance of developing strong and meaningful relationships. The principal setting the culture of caring and creating a sense of team was one of the primary areas mentioned when developing those relationships. Developing these relationships with students occurred even before the students entered ninth grade. George, the ninth-grade center principal, shared this during his interview:

I would say I spent a considerable amount of time attending 8th grade sporting events and extracurricular activities and just took advantage of some opportunities to get out and meet our future students, their families and parents to answer questions and start building relationships.

Recruiting teachers who want to teach ninth graders, developing a vision that aligns this work, then providing teachers with resources and training to support these efforts was noted.

Alice, a teacher, noted that recruiting staff with a diverse background was helpful in creating a strong team. She expressed the following:

I think as far as the process for selecting the staff, I would say anyone that has a good middle school background, upper middle school, and is probably like a little bit more ideal than working maybe with twelfth graders 'cause it's close to that developmental area so not to exclude those, but I think probably as far as experience and building relationships with their kids, anyone that has a passion for this particular age group, the content area, and then that are also extremely, I wanna say, emotionally intelligent themselves and self-aware because I think it's such a critical time that being able to identify those things in their students and being able to build those relationships, I would say that emotional intelligence, or social emotional learning, or being able to build those relationships, is a critical part.

Another important element related to the social and emotional needs of students that is related to building a sense of team and forming relationships is the use of a character education curriculum or special program. The site study selected *Habitudes* to be used with all ninth graders. This selection occurred during the staff training days. *Habitudes* is a leadership curriculum that can be used to build character, leadership skills, communication skills, and positive relationships between peers and peers with adults (Elmore, 2007). One of the district administrators, Naveen, made this observation about the character program and how it also impacted professional learning, as well as the creation of a learner profile that is depicted in

Appendix I:

We had a number of planning and think tank sessions that really did focus around again, what does a typical, and I almost hate to say that, but I don't know a better word, ninth grader look like? And what characteristics do they bring to the table and what are their social and emotional needs? We provided five additional days of staff development at the beginning of the year for the staff to come together and start to form a team. We also developed a school motto and learner profile during this time too. The staff development before school started was very impactful. And it was a combination of just some team building and relationship building to make sure that the culture was created and the climate was what it needed to be with the staff. Some of that training focused on *Habitudes*, which is a character education program that focuses on developing strong peer relationships, communication and character traits. There are leadership components too. The students received this instruction during advisory time, which also helped them for a

mentor-type relationship with a teacher. The teachers received their training on this program during those five additional days before school started.

In addition, the character curriculum was used to create a sense of team and build relationships.

Another teacher, Gale, noted in his interview how he was using Habitudes and that the smaller building impacted his ability to create and sustain positive relationships with his students, which had a positive effect on their social and emotional well-being. He commented:

So for social and emotional, I mentioned Habitudes as a weekly process for our students. There's also some individual small interventions made. I mentor a group of boys that I work with social skills with them as a continuation of the Habitudes. So for social emotional, I mentioned Habitudes, that's something I think our teachers have responded well to. For academic needs, we have lots of strategies in place, as far as the block lunch tutorials, before and after school tutoring sessions, Friday Night Live and our RtI [response to intervention] protocols. The smaller campus is a bit more intimate as far as your feel with the students because there are fewer of them. So it's easier to know a lot of the students on campus. Also, with a freshman-only campus, leadership roles don't go to the upperclassmen because we don't have them. They are the only ones here so they have to step up. They're able to develop leadership skills by virtue of being the oldest ones on campus, the ones that are expected to lead, so that is a little bit different. We also created a learner profile before the start of the school year, which has helped us focus our work.

Another element identified as having significance regarding social and emotional needs of students related to the use of counselors and the implementation of restorative practices.

George, the ninth grade center principal, cited the role of the counselors in incorporating restorative practices as having an impact on the ninth graders. He voiced his support of this strategy as follows:

Our counselors have got some good things in place. They are supporting the weekly Wednesday incorporation of Habitudes. I know there are at least two or three different focus groups for a particular population of students who have some struggles in a social/emotional or academic area. And then the restorative practices piece we're piloting on campus and so we only have a handful of teachers who have adopted the practices like the circles, the classroom environment pieces of restorative practices that we are trying to implement in a way to build community in the classroom and to try and establish that safe place to be unique and be yourself. For kids to be open and willing to share some things. It's a pilot, so it's on a smaller scale, but we are, I believe, starting to see a difference with kids.

One of the counselors in the study, Jackie, summarized the role of the counselor as follows:

As a counselor, I see the kids in various settings. I also have the opportunity to get to know them one-on-one that might not be as easy for a classroom teacher. However, being on a campus that's ninth grade only, it allows for your staff to get to know each other better and for all of us to get to know our students better. Just by the smaller numbers, there is a greater possibility of most of your staff at least having an idea of who your students are. 940 is a whole lot less than 3,600.

Alice, one of the teachers in the focus group, identified the importance of focusing on the social and emotional needs of the ninth graders:

Our ninth graders have real specific needs, especially in the social development area. I think it's normal, like mental health kind of stuff. It's just really important because I think ninth-grade depression, anxiety, stress, those are the things that I'm seeing most often.

The heavy need to focus on social and emotional learning, but the lack of training in this area, was noted by the counselor Jackie:

The counselors were able to lead some training on social and emotional learning, but we need to be able to offer more. It's a genuine need here.

Communication

Communication emerged in several areas, including leadership, being a separate campus, and creating a shared vision. It also was identified by Jackie, the counselor at the ninth-grade center, as being important when developing strong relationships with students:

It's funny, I think eye contact, as crazy as that sounds, is an important part in communication and my perception of a successful transition to high school. There's an aura of confidence about those who have adjusted well to this transition. You can tell in body language and the non-verbal how they carry themselves, but I feel like we've seen our students adjust quicker to the assimilation into one group from three than what you might see on a nine through 12 campus. It's important when establishing relationships too, so it's a strong life skill.

Communication was identified as not only being important on the campus, but also is necessary between the campus and central office and the ninth-grade center and the main high

school. There were examples of positive evidence of effective communication, but one teacher, Clyde, raised this concern during the focus-group interview:

I think one challenge that leads this opportunity is the way that we introduce eighth graders to opportunities at high school. I know that this discussion is already taking place for how we will do that in the spring and in the past it's been more of a walk through tour of that's biology over there, that's another subject over there, it's just more in passing and doesn't really communicate everything the school has to offer.

The counselor who participated in the focus-group interview identified the significance of communicating with the incoming ninth-grade students early on in the process and stressed the importance of starting to form a team. This counselor emphasized the need to involve students in the development of the ninth-grade center. She added:

I was able to attend some of those meetings with Mr. X and the middle school kids and it was great. We ordered pizza and had some great discussions with the kids about coming to the ninth-grade campus and what were their biggest concerns or fears. We talked about the exciting parts of it too. They were really able to provide us with a lot of input. I guess you could say we did focus groups with the eighth graders and their input became invaluable.

Related to the challenges of a separate campus, another area of concern centered on leadership, communication, and involving stakeholders from the main high school campus. One of the teachers, Alice, expressed her concern about times when certain messages communicated with the main high school campus did not make it to those at the ninth-grade center. According to Alice, the communication with the ninth-grade campus was more of an "afterthought" and when communication with the ninth-grade campus did not occur, it impacted those at the ninth-grade campus. She explained:

I think that, I know, there's been conversations about a lot of the policies and procedures from the main high school and the ninth-grade campus. There's got to be good communication and collaboration. I think sometimes there's not as much communication and it's kind of like an afterthought and they're like, "Oh yeah, we need to go back and make sure we tie this group from the ninth-grade campus in." I know there have been some struggles with that from the two campuses, but I think the intention is moving forward to work through those kinks.

Creating a Shared Vision

Participants reported the value of including all stakeholders in major decisions and the appreciation of being included and having a voice in the opening of the ninth-grade center. Throughout the development of the ninth-grade center, there were several opportunities for various stakeholders to be involved in the decision-making process. This process included the development of a shared vision and mission that the campus leaders confirmed during the additional five days of staff development before the start of the school year. During this time, the counselors at the ninth-grade center created a learner profile. Jackie, one of the counselors who was a member of the original design team, identified and highlighted the value of the profile:

Our district solicited community input and provided various opportunities to provide feedback and ultimately the school board decided on the ninth-grade campus, but lots of people had input. I think that the thing that was the catalyst for our campus was first about growth in the district and that I don't think there was enough room at the high school long term. And during this process, one of the most pivotal pieces was the design work we did. I think that was so important for us as we had taken the time to establish a shared vision, a purpose, a culture, a direction, our learner profile, and the ownership was so well distributed that things didn't matter. The creation of the learner profile was a truly invaluable piece of the process and has really helped us center our work. Overall, it was a great process and I was glad a counselor's voice was included.

During his in-depth interview, George, the ninth-grade center principal, noted that the importance of the creation of a learner profile. He stated:

I would say the creation of our guiding purpose, the learner profile, and our motto, "Build Everyday Champions," was one of the top five things we accomplished during those extra five days before school started.

Several teachers, Barbara, Helen, and Alice, supported this sentiment during the focus-group interview. Alice's comments about the strength of their teacher training and the creation of the learner profile were confirmed by both Barbara and Helen. As stated by Alice:

I really liked the creation of the learner profile. That was a very powerful part of our teacher training. I was surprised by how quickly we were able to come to consensus on our guiding purpose too. That whole thing we did was really, really meaningful to me.

Nadia, one of the district administrators who was involved in helping to set the vision and mission of the ninth-grade center with the principal and his team as they were being prepared and trained to open the ninth-grade center, spoke about the power of that experience:

The staff was provided five additional days before the start of the school year to train the teachers and prepare of the opening of the school. As a member of the district curriculum team, we helped support training around professional learning communities, alignment of courses and sequences and a heavy focus on social and emotional learning. During the semester prior, I was a part of the design charrette that helped the principal build a framework for what he wanted to do when all of the staff came back together. This plan included the development of a campus vision, learner profile and guiding purpose. It was powerful because we were going through a district strategic design process and this work completely aligned with what [campus principal] was going to be doing with his team. The [campus] guiding purpose was in complete alignment with our district core values.

On more than one occasion, participants identified the value they placed on the time they spent during teacher training, developing the vision and mission of the ninth-grade center, creating a learner profile, and crafting the guiding purpose for the campus.

Involve Stakeholders

In regard to the renovation of the campus, the creation of the ninth-grade center as a separate campus, and involving teachers in the design of the building, Helen, one of the teachers from the focus group, made these observations:

I was going to say just the way that we have the flexible learning spaces that the teachers can utilize at any time, I love. My favorite part on this campus is the CTE collaboration space and how that can be utilized for several different activities for the ninth graders in the CTE program, the cafeteria, just the furniture. Even the furniture that we picked out and how teachers were included in the design and ordering process was huge and I think is really useful for the students. They can sit, stand, fidget, whatever they need to do...whatever fits their personality. I really like that our teachers have their collaboration spaces and a place for our professional learning communities to gather. That came straight from teacher input. I really like the way that our teachers are using that space.

One of the district administrators who was a member of the original design team charged with creating the ninth-grade center was Nadia who shared these thoughts during her in-depth interview about the involvement of stakeholders and their input in the design of the building.

So in this building there's lots of collaborative areas, right? We believe that it [learning] happens outside of the four walls of the classroom. So you have to design with the learning in mind...you have to design for spaces for learners to be mindful. To have those more intimate experiences, but those one-on-one relationship-building experiences, so there have to be spaces for that as well.

Including all stakeholders in the design process of the ninth-grade center was identified as significant by participants; however, it was noted by at least one participant that some of the teachers who were slated to actually work at the ninth-grade center were not included in the discussions. Not having enough representation from the classroom teachers and the need to include more teachers in the design process was noted as a concern by Katherine, one of the teachers in the focus group. She commented:

I believe the district used a sample of different teachers to help with the site along with committee members and other school personnel and administrators at the district level, as to whether it was going to be here or where the new middle school is. I don't know that a lot of input was sought out by a lot of other people, especially to people that were gonna be working at it.

The concern about lack of communication, especially between the ninth-grade center, the main high school campus, and at times the district office, was identified by three participants as a significant concern. The importance of good communication was an emergent theme throughout the coding process. Although all of the participants identified campus leadership as the most important element of a ninth-grade center, having a separate space for ninth graders and providing engaging and meaningful professional learning opportunities for staff were also noted as important. The ninth-grade center leaders' ability to create a clear vision, build strong relationships and create a sense of team, and the involvement of all stakeholders in the decision-

making process were also identified as significant elements to consider when creating a ninth-grade center. These emergent themes were evident throughout the study and related to all three research questions but the highest frequency aligned with research question one.

Additional Student Data

Additional data were collected and reviewed to analyze any impact the separate ninth-grade center might have on the academic performance and attendance records for the ninth-grade students. Table 9 displays the overall number of final report card grades below 70 by each subject and the yearly attendance averages. The listing in the table is by number of students who had a report card grade below a 70. For example, in 2019 there were 22 students who had report card grades below a 70 on their report card in the English and 14 students who had report card grades below a 70 in Fine Arts. The data presented covered a three-year period.

Table 9

Additional Student Data: Number of Grades below 70 by Subject and Yearly Attendance

Subject	2017	2018	2019
English	18	13	22
Fine Arts	12	15	14
Mathematics	12	35	22
Science	13	23	30
Social Studies	16	17	10
Attendance	97.39%	96.93%	96.73%
Total ninth graders	931	909	922

The additional student data included both report card grades and the yearly attendance averages for ninth graders. The purpose behind gathering this additional data was to identify any notable trends in academic performance and attendance records to determine if the ninth-grade

center had a positive impact on student grades and attendance. The number of grades below a 70 in the four core subject areas and fine arts were received from the district's data department. The attendance rates were collected from the district website. Of significance is the 2017 and 2018 data that occurred when the ninth graders were housed at the main high school campus. The information collected during 2019 was from the first year the ninth-grade center was open.

Summary

The purpose of this research was to answer the three research questions guiding the study that involved an examination of the transition from middle school to high school. The data collected in this study consisted of six face-to-face interviews and one focus-group interview with six participants. The participants in this study included district administrators, a campus administrator, counselors and teachers from the ninth-grade center that is one of the campuses within a public school district in Texas. The qualitative data analysis of the responses provided during the individual interviews and focus-group interview provided answers to Research Questions 1, 2 and 3. The data were collected and analyzed to determine what supportive conditions might be implemented by a school district that could lead to the successful development and implementation of a ninth-grade center. From the data, several trends and themes emerged. Building off the three conceptual framework components of teacher recruitment and training, social and emotional needs of students, and the physical design of the facility, eight themes emerged from the coding of the data. These eight emergent themes were: (1) campus leadership, (2) professional learning, (3) a separate campus, (4) teambuilding and developing relationships, (5) transition, (6) communication, (7) vision/mission and (8) the involvement of stakeholders. Chapter five provides an overview of the research study, a revisit of the purpose and significance of the study, and the sample population. The results are

discussed and conclusions based on the findings are presented. Finally, implications and recommendations for future studies concerning students' transition to the ninth grade are shared.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter includes a summary of this qualitative descriptive case study, with an overview of the research study and a review of the problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, and methodology. The results of this study were obtained through the qualitative methods described in chapter three. In addition, this chapter includes a discussion of the findings, an interpretation of how these findings address each of the research questions, and the correlation to prior research. The chapter concludes with implications for action and recommendations for future research.

Overview of the Study

A review of the literature supports the need for ninth graders to receive specific assistance as they transition from middle school to high school when the school environment evolves into a more complex system with greater social and academic demands which a ninth grader must manage (Roderick, 2013). The transition from middle school to high school has been cited as a critical event and an important factor in students' high school experience, particularly considering their need to demonstrate academic achievement (Kelly, 2013). In addition to academics, this transition is one that affects students emotionally. They must navigate the "daunting task in overcoming the social, emotional, physical and intellectual challenges" and, as a result, may "feel overwhelmed, confused, and alone at the high school level" (Cook, Fowler & Harris, 2008, p. 2). Generally, students entering high school have a high need to emotionally belong and socially be accepted by their peer group (Kelly, 2013). Students typically transition from a smaller middle school campus to a larger high school campus. Most traditional high schools have a physically larger space than middle schools, forcing additional

obstacles for ninth graders as they maneuver much larger physical spaces on the high school campus (McIntosh & White, 2006). Traditional high schools also have more staff and a higher student enrollment; often, these staff members lack the appropriate training or experience to specifically meet the unique needs of ninth-grade students. At times, ninth graders can feel alone and alienated in a large high school, which can have a detrimental effect on their social and emotional well-being. According to Akos (2004), adjusting to the social aspects of transitioning from middle school to high school may be equally as important as adjusting to academic demands. Adolescents have a very strong desire to be accepted by their peer group. The transition to high school also involves a more bureaucratic system than elementary and middle schools, with a heavy emphasis on gaining course credits and mastering standardized tests. This focus can lead to depersonalization and a lack of community at a time when a sense of community is highly relevant to the lives of students (Lee & Smith, 2011).

Besides social and emotional concerns, academic issues also can be a challenge for ninth graders. In a study by Akos (2004), of the 320 ninth-grader students surveyed, the top two items they feared most about entering high school concerned academics, their ability to be successful in the classroom, and their ability to successfully complete homework. Additional challenges may exist for students who enter high school academically below grade level. Some high school teachers may not be adequately prepared to teach the basic numeracy and literacy skills necessary to reduce the achievement gap (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Providing the appropriate training and adequate resources to help teachers better meet the social and emotional needs of freshmen can benefit a teacher's overall experience at the ninth-grade campus (McIntosh & White, 2006) and, as a result, students may be more likely to enjoy and learn in that more supportive environment.

In an effort to address the issues associated with the middle school to high school transition, some school districts began creating separate learning spaces for their ninth-grade students, housing them in a ninth-grade center or campus to better meet their unique academic and emotional needs (Lee & Smith, 2011). Nevertheless, many school districts currently lack an understanding of the process used to design and implement a successful ninth-grade center as there are few guidelines to follow when designing a ninth-grade center. Because of these limited resources, district leaders are left to design their own resource of best practices when creating a ninth-grade center, specifically in the area of school reform. As a result, campus and district leaders continue to struggle when attempting to implement meaningful school reforms that significantly impact student achievement (Fullan, 2011). Districts need, but currently lack, guidelines for and examples of effective implementation and the sustainability of ninth-grade centers within their school system. To address this need, it is important to identify the challenges associated with students' transition from middle school to high school. This identification may provide administrative staff with data to support the implementation of a ninth-grade center to assure a smooth transition from middle school to high school. School districts are striving to identify and implement the supportive conditions needed in creating a ninth-grade center.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the processes, supports, and practices used by district and campus level administrators and staff to create a ninth-grade center in their school district, and to examine and describe the effects on student success of implementing a ninth-grade center. In this study of a public school system, staff members with differing backgrounds, experiences, and job roles were interviewed to assess their perspectives on the effectiveness of the transition from middle school to high school with the utilization of a

ninth-grade center. To accomplish this purpose, I examined key components described in the conceptual framework. These components are teacher recruitment and training, the social and emotional needs of the ninth-grade learners, and the physical design of the school building. Each of these areas was addressed through these three research questions:

1. What processes do district and campus level administrators use to create a ninth-grade center?
2. What components of the ninth-grade center have the greatest impact on student success?
3. What perceptions do staff have regarding the process of students transitioning from middle school to the ninth grade?

Review of Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was twofold: (1) to examine administrators' strategies and practices in creating and implementing a ninth-grade center, and (2) to examine the strategies and practices related to students' academic performance and social and emotional well-being. A focus-group interview and in-depth individual interviews were used to uncover the campus and district actions staff members identified as most important in the development of a successful transition program for ninth graders. The focus-group interview allowed for a broader understanding and clarification of answers to the research questions and provided triangulation in obtaining additional qualitative information as to the best practices for an effective high school transition program. Additional data related to ninth graders' overall attendance and non-passing grades during the first year of high school were used as another layer for this study.

The literature review for this study focused primarily on three major components that were identified as key elements for addressing ninth graders' failure to successfully transition from middle school to high school. These components were the recruitment of the teaching staff

and professional training, social and emotional needs of students, and the physical design of the facility. Eight themes emerged from the coding of all interview data: campus leadership, professional learning, separate campus, teambuilding/relationships, transition, communication, vision/mission, and the involvement of stakeholders.

Discussion of the Findings

Chapter 4 revealed the emergent themes and findings of the research data, illustrated with specific examples the participants provided during the focus-group interview and in-depth interviews. This section applies these results to the specific research questions and provides a comprehensive summary of the findings. The results of the study aligned to the conceptual framework and are applicable to the research design of the study. Table 10 displays the emergent themes as they relate to the three research questions of the study. As shown in the table, each theme is paired with the corresponding research questions. It is clear that the emerged themes cross over among the three research questions.

Table 10

Findings Related to the Research Questions

Research Question	Emergent Themes
RQ1 What processes do district and campus level administrators use to create a ninth-grade center?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campus leadership • Professional learning • Teambuilding and relationships • Involve stakeholders
RQ2 What components of the ninth-grade center have the greatest impact on student success?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campus leadership • Professional Learning • Separate campus • Vision
RQ3 What perceptions do staff have regarding the process of students transitioning from middle school to the ninth grade?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Teambuilding and relationships • Transition

RQ1: Processes used by District and Ninth-Grade Center Administrators

The principal of the ninth-grade center and his team had a clear vision for the school and a collaborative focus on building relationships and helping students be successful. The district also had high expectations for student achievement and success. The campus leadership had done a nice job of hiring staff members who understands ninth graders and have a strong desire to see them succeed. The recruitment, selection, and training of teachers were essential components of creating a successful school. Queen (2012) stated that the teacher's role in the transition from middle school to high school is a vital one; teachers' direct involvement during this time of transition does have an impact on student success. Specifically, the teachers should be "armed with the skills and a clear understanding of the characteristics of the social and emotional development" of teenagers (p. 29). Some of Queen's suggested activities include:

- 1) Building a team atmosphere among the ninth-grader teachers in relation to behavior, academics, and extra-curricular events;
- 2) Cultivating appropriate personal relationships with students;
- 3) Being proactive in establishing supportive parental relationships;
- 4) Communicating with both the middle school and upperclassman teachers to create a seamless transition from middle school to high school; and
- 5) Seeking the assistance of support personnel when a student does not appear to be handling transition successfully. (p. 28)

Results from the focus-group interview and the in-depth interviews confirmed the importance of recruiting and selecting teachers who are the best fit for working with ninth-grade students. These results strongly suggest that hiring and training teachers is an essential component that campus and district administrators must provide in order to create a successful ninth-grade center. In addition, providing ample time for professional learning and team building to take place prior to the beginning of the school year cultivated positive working

relationships and helped to form a supportive campus culture. The additional days of professional development prior to the start of the school year allowed the educators to develop a learner profile that was used to guide the work of the campus, develop and foster relationships with the ninth-grade students, and provide a focused intent for teachers and staff to reference in their efforts to help the ninth-grade students achieve the desired outcomes during their freshman school year. The goal of selecting and training the right staff in order to create trust, empower teachers and staff to effectively do their jobs, and work together as a team to best meet the needs of the student body was identified as a high priority by all participants.

The most consistent response from participants indicated that the ninth-grade center principal played the most influential role in creating a team, establishing the culture, and setting the vision of the school. The principal uses his or her knowledge as an instructional leader to set the tone of the campus and shape the vision of the school (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2014). School leaders who have high expectations for teaching and learning can positively impact student achievement. The participants' responses were consistent with the research that indicates a strong campus leader is associated with a student's successful transition to high school and improved student achievement (Benner et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2008; DeJesus, 2008; Ellerbrock, 2012). A strong ninth-grade center administrator, leading a supportive team of teachers, can also address transition challenges and use best practices to decrease ninth graders' anxiety related to the high school transition.

The campus and school district leaders provided a variety of training for staff. Teachers identified the importance of supporting teacher training, both from their campus and district leadership. Butts and Cruzeiro (2005) recognized the importance of alignment between campus and district goals when developing a comprehensive staff development plan. The teaching staff

in this study identified the importance of quality training, especially when addressing the unique needs of ninth graders, particularly in the areas of social and emotional learning. Barrow (2015) argued that a significant emphasis on training in the area of social and emotional learning is equally as important as training that focuses on academics. The participants noted the need to receive more training in the social and emotional area as that area did not receive as heavy a focus during their teacher preparation and certification training.

The involvement of key stakeholders in the development of a ninth-grade campus was identified by participants as being a key contributing factor in creating a successful ninth-grade center. This identification indicates the district likely made an intentional effort to consider the voice of all stakeholders when embarking on a major decision of this magnitude. Including a representation from all impacted groups when making full-scale decisions or starting a new initiative can improve the likelihood of staff buy-in, thus increasing the chance of successful implementation (Pagler & Fager, 2010). Of significance, teachers, counselors, and administrators all shared the need to have a voice in the development of the ninth-grade center. This voice allowed for key stakeholders to have an influence on the design, structure, and focus of the center. The decision to create a ninth-grade center that was separate from the main high school campus provided the opportunity for the ninth-grade center educators to focus on the unique needs of the ninth graders, but still be connected to the main campus.

RQ2: Components of the Ninth-Grade Center and Student Success

Again, strong leaders at the ninth-grade center who were able to set a clear vision for the school and professional learning that aligned with that vision were at the top of the list regarding important components of ninth-grade centers, particular as they related to student success. In particular, teachers noted the importance of a strong principal as an instructional leader,

especially in the area of professional learning communities (PLCs). Johnson and Voelkel (2019) found that the principal is the key influencer when it comes to establishing and supporting high-functioning campus PLCs that increase learning and improve student achievement. Teacher participants' responses focused on several aspects related to the principal's role in creating successful PLCs: (a) the principal's ability to communicate expectations regarding the work of the PLC teams, and (b) the principal's ability to create a schedule where teachers had the time to meet together on a frequent and regular basis. As noted by DuFour et al. (2016), the campus leadership must devote time and attention to forming teacher groups into highly effective and functioning teams where each staff member has a contributing role. There are natural and created barriers that arise when forming high-functional PLC teams and the obligation to remove the barriers is the responsibility of the campus principal (Johnson & Voelkel, 2019).

Having a smaller, separate ninth-grade center, essentially creating a small learning community for the ninth grade, was another key component identified by the administrators, teachers, and staff. Cauley and Jovanich (2016) asserted that the creation of small learning communities, particularly at the ninth-grade level, can lead to increased student attendance, decreased behavioral issues, and overall academic improvement. Most participants identified the separate ninth-grade facility as a significant contributing factor to student success; however, the separate campus was not without concerns. Several participants voiced concerns that the distance between the ninth-grade center and main high school campus at times created issues with students traveling back and forth between the two campuses due to ninth-grade students taking advanced courses that were offered only at the main high school campus, as well as the various extracurricular activities in which ninth-grade students participated.

Communication between the two campuses was identified as a significant need for the two schools to successfully function as a combined unit. It should also be noted that there appeared to be a disconnect between the employees that were being supported and the employees that provided the support. Specifically, several participants from the ninth-grade center shared about a lack of visibility by the central office administrators. Those teachers and staff indicated they desired to have a more prominent level of support from the district office. The recognition of these areas reveals that district and campus leadership still have work to do in terms of collaboration, visibility, and communication between the ninth-grade center and the main high school.

RQ3: Teacher and Counselor Perceptions of the High School Transition

Being assigned fewer students creates the opportunity to build stronger relationships between the teacher and the students and provides teachers with a more manageable workload to better meet individual student needs (Ellerbrock, 2012). All of the teachers and counselors at the ninth-grade center supported the need for the district to make significant changes to improve the transition from middle school to high school and applauded the district's efforts in creating the ninth-grade center. The smaller ninth-grade center with a lower overall student enrollment was favored by participants.

The need to provide program support and training for staff in the area of social and emotional learning is a critical component of working with ninth graders (Ellerbrock & Keiffer, 2013). The need to provide a greater focus on social and emotional learning was noted by teachers and counselors who participated in this study. Although they recognized that this need was being met better at the ninth-grade center, they also acknowledged there was more work still

to be done. Several participants referenced the Habitudes curriculum as a positive program, a program that was implemented only at the ninth-grade center.

Another supportive feature of the new school was the ability to build a sense of team with the teachers and counselors due to a heavy focus on collaboration with their PLC work and building caring relationships with one another. The teachers and counselors noted that this strong sense of team and the development of a culture of caring had subsequently transferred to the student body. According to Wiggins and McTighe (2008), teachers need ample time to not only do curriculum planning before the start of the school year, but the opportunity to collaborate, build relationships, and grow together as a team. In line with Wiggins and McTighe, several participants mentioned the importance of having five additional staff development days before the start of the school year. The time to plan together helped to create a sense of family and a positive culture for the campus.

Additional student data were collected and reviewed as an extra layer of data analysis. This additional data included an overall review of final grades below a 70 in core subject areas and select elective classes. Attendance rates were also reviewed. These additional data were reviewed over a three-year period. The first two years of data were reported when the ninth graders were housed on the main high school campus. The third year included the first year the ninth-grade center was in full operation. There was no significant variance in the attendance data as the annual ninth-grade attendance rate for three years was in the high 90s. In regard to final grades below a 70, only fine arts, mathematics, and social studies had a reduction in the number of failing grades. The number of English and science below-70 grades was actually lower when the ninth graders were housed at the main high school as opposed to the separate ninth-grade facility. In addition to the change in location of the ninth graders over the three-year period, a

change in campus leadership also occurred; therefore, the change in leadership might account for the notable lack of change in the data across the three years.

As a whole, the majority of participants reported a need for district leaders to provide additional support to ninth graders as they transition to high school as this transition has historically been a challenging one for the school district. The need for the separate ninth-grade center with a specific vision and focus on ninth graders' unique needs was identified, especially the need to be accepted by others and feel connected to the school. Additional support for those ninth graders who enter high school with academic deficiency was also noted as a concern. Designing educational experiences with interventions to help reduce the achievement gap was identified as a significant need by more than two participants.

Implications for Action

Several recommendations emerged when examining the findings of this study. The results of this study provide suggestions for school districts developing a ninth-grade campus. The results presented in Chapter 4 and discussed in this chapter inform the following recommended guidelines and procedures for school district leaders and campus administrators to use when designing a ninth-grade center. These recommendations involve (1) supportive campus leadership having a clear vision for the school; (2) professional learning for the faculty; (3) development and implementation of professional learning communities; (4) a facility that is separate from the main high school campus, but is aligned as to assist with a smoother transition to high school and help with communication; (5) establishing and maintaining positive relationships; and (6) including all stakeholders in the process.

The scope of this study was limited to the examination of one suburban public school district with a ninth-grade center. My goal in conducting this study was to offer campus and

district administrators suggestions and recommendations they could implement in order to open and sustain a ninth-grade center. My hope is to provide helpful information administrators may use to successfully operate a ninth-grade campus and, in doing so, improve student achievement for the ninth grade students in their districts.

Recommendations for Further Research

Findings from this study provide a snapshot of campus and district administrators' best practices when designing and implementing a ninth-grade center. Though informative; the findings of this study are limited. A broader study with more participants could lead to further investigations regarding students transitioning from middle school to high school. Additionally, surveying students in a wide variety of high schools could elicit more in-depth data and provide additional information to assist campus and district administrators in understanding the unique needs of ninth graders as they transition to high school. It might also be beneficial to add a component that examines the inclusion of a service learning program into the curriculum of the ninth-grade center in an effort to help the students grow in the area of service and further character development.

This study could be expanded beyond its current scope in numerous ways. First, this study could be replicated and extended to include the examination and comparison of multiple school districts related to the transition into high school. The current study examined only one school district and even though the findings may be transferable to other districts with similar demographics and profiles, it could be beneficial to examine how the results might impact a variety of school districts, especially those with multiple high schools. More specifically, a comparison of multiple high schools and the impact the leadership has on a ninth-grade student's successful transition to high school, as well as of the partnerships created between the high

schools and the middle schools that feed into these high schools, could be useful.

This study focused on the high school transition from the point of view of district leaders involved in working with the development and creation of a ninth-grade center, the ninth-grade center principal, teachers, and counselors. It might be interesting to examine how the transition to high school might begin during the eighth-grade school year and how middle school leaders, teachers, and counselors might help to support this transition. An expansion of the current study could reveal additional recommendations to district administrators as they search for ways to improve the support their district is currently providing during the transition into high school.

Follow-up to the Current Study

Based on the research findings of Akos (2004) and Ellerbrock (2012), it is recommended that transition activities begin in middle school. Another opportunity to continue this research could be to include the parent perspective and to identify supportive measures that provide parents with opportunities to help their children transition from middle school to high school. Parents could be asked prior to their children starting high school about their expectations for the success of their students. Sample research questions used to guide such a study might include the following: What is the parent's perspective regarding the high school transition? What are the needs of the parents during this time period and what are the critical components of a parental involvement plan? Parents could complete a survey during the spring of their child's eighth-grade year of middle school, complete a follow-up survey during the middle of the ninth-grade year, and finally complete a concluding survey at the end of their students' ninth-grade year. The parents could also receive specific training to assist them when working with their child for both academic and social and emotional issues. Providing eighth-grade students with individualized guidance and support during the spring semester prior to the start of high school,

as well as including their parents in this transition process, could be highly beneficial. This type of research could supplement the current study and provide additional validity to the findings.

Longitudinal Possibilities

The current study could also be extended to include a longitudinal approach to the research. One option might be to follow a sample group of ninth-grade students over time and examine their progress throughout all four years of high school. The participant sample could include students who attended a ninth-grade campus and those who moved into the district after their freshman year. In a comparative study, the question could be asked: Were there any differences between the students who completed ninth grade at a ninth-grade center and those who did not?

Finally, it would be interesting to see what happens to the students who are not successful during the ninth grade. Do they remain at the ninth-grade center or are they socially promoted to the main high school campus? Do they receive additional supports to help them with remediation in getting back on grade level with the goal being to graduate from high school with their peers?

Summary

Without specific and strategic supports provided by both the district and campus administration, the transition to high school will continue to be a challenge and ninth-grade centers will only delay those challenges for another year. There is significant documentation in the literature for the need to support ninth graders as they transition to high school (Akos, 2004; Benner et al., 2017; Eccles, 2004; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). This study brought an in-depth examination of one district's journey in creating a ninth-grade center in an effort to ease the potential negative issues that might arise when students transition from middle

school to high school. Results of this study suggest that strong leadership at both the campus and district levels is essential. The campus needs a strong principal to guide and lead the teachers when tasked with the opportunity to develop a ninth-grade center and equally as important is the district leadership in helping to set the vision and provide continual supportive methods throughout the development and implementation of a ninth-grade center.

The teaching staff and the professional learning opportunities provided to them is another important element of a successful ninth-grade center. The study findings revealed that teacher selection and the development of the teachers are critical components to a successful ninth-grade center. Specifically, the role that professional learning communities play in regard to student achievement and the delivery of the curriculum is key. Communication and relationship building are paramount in developing a ninth-grade center. How the vision and mission of the center is communicated to all stake holders and how this communication is sustained throughout the year is essential. The communication between the ninth-grade center, the main high school, and the district office is extremely important to the success of the ninth-grade center, as well as the relationships that are formed among these three groups. Ideally, the ninth-grade center should be in close proximity to the main high school; however, the ninth-grade center should have the autonomy to create and utilize its own practices and procedures to best meet the needs of its ninth-grade learners. The facility should be one that is designed with ninth-grade students' needs in mind, so they have plenty of opportunities to explore and grow, both academically and socially.

The transition to high school can be challenging for some students as they face obstacles related to academics, as well as social and behavioral difficulties. Transition best practices must include plans to address all of these areas. A positive staff of teachers and a strong campus

leadership can have a positive impact on a ninth grader's transition to high school. The development of authentic, positive, and caring relationships between staff members and the students was another relevant finding of the study. Without strong leadership, a staff who work collaboratively together to build relationships and support students' academic and social and emotional needs, and a facility designed to support the unique needs of its students, the transition from middle school to high school for many ninth graders may continue to be a struggle.

APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

November 20, 2018

PI: Barbara Pazey

Study Title: Supportive Conditions for the Successful Development of Ninth-Grade Centers

RE: Human Subjects Application # IRB-18-484

Dear Dr. Barbara Pazey:

As permitted by federal law and regulations governing the use of human subjects in research projects (45 CFR 46), the UNT Institutional Review Board has reviewed your proposed project titled "Supportive Conditions for the Successful Development of Ninth-Grade Centers." The risks inherent in this research are minimal, and the potential benefits to the subject outweigh those risks. The submitted protocol is hereby approved for the use of human subjects in this study. **Federal Policy 45 CFR 46.109(e) stipulates that IRB approval is for one year only, November 20, 2018 through November 19, 2019.**

Attached to your IRB application under the Attachments tab of the Study Details section are the consent documents with IRB approval. Please copy and **use this form only** for your study subjects.

It is your responsibility according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services regulations to submit annual and terminal progress reports to the IRB for this project. The IRB must also review this project prior to any modifications. **If continuing review is not granted before November 19, 2019, IRB approval of this research expires on that date.**

Please contact The Office of Research Integrity and Compliance at 940-565-4643, if you wish to make changes or need additional information.

Sincerely,

Shelley Riggs, Ph.D.

Professor

Chair, Institutional Review Board

SR:jm

APPENDIX B

STUDENT INVESTIGATOR - INFORMED CONSENT NOTICE AND ADULT SUBJECTS

FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW

University of North Texas Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent Notice

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

Title of Study: Supportive Conditions for the Successful Development of Ninth-Grade Centers

Student Investigator: Brad Hunt, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Teacher Education and Administration. Supervising Investigator: Dr. Barbara Pazey, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Teacher Education and Administration. External Facilitator: Dr. Christy Fiori

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this case study is to determine how district and school leadership impact the successful development of ninth-grade centers. Through this case study, the effects of administrative support for teacher recruitment and training, the social and emotional needs of the students, and the physical design of the campus will be investigated. Through a focus-group interview comprised of teachers and staff, we hope to gain a broader understanding of the impact leadership has on these components will be obtained.

Study Procedures: If selected for participation, you will be asked to take part in a one-time focus-group interview conducted by an external facilitator, Dr. Christy Fiori. As the primary researcher, Brad Hunt is soliciting the services of an outside facilitator to bracket himself from the data collection and provide a greater level of objectivity. The focus-group interview is expected to last approximately 90 minutes.

During the course of the study, you will be asked to participate in the following procedures:

- If you agree to participate, you will be included in a focus-group interview led by the external facilitator, Dr. Fiori. The focus-group interview will be set up at a time convenient for the participants. With your permission, the focus-group interview will be audio recorded and notes will be taken. You will select a pseudonym that you will be asked to state before any response. Brad Hunt will not listen to the audio recordings, to protect your identity. Mr. Hunt only will review the transcriptions of the recordings. You will be asked to review the analysis of the transcribed recordings to assure that the analysis accurately represents your input. The external facilitator will meet with you for this review. The information to be gleaned through the focus-group interview will be concentrated on the participants' viewpoints of the implementation of a ninth-grade center practices and procedures that make it successful.

Foreseeable Risks: The potential risks involved in this study are minimal and relate to the inconvenience of time. Although not expected, if you become uncomfortable during the focus-group interview you may decline to answer a question or withdraw completely from the study at any time without penalty.

Benefits to the Subjects and others:

- The benefits of participating in the study is expected to contribute to sharing what X ISD has learned about the development and implementation of a ninth-grade center which may potentially help other school districts in the future.
- You may not experience any personal benefits from participating in this study.
 Compensation for Participants: You will receive bottled water and snacks as compensation for your participation. The total value of the refreshments is approximately \$30.00.

Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records: Information collected about you will be handled in a confidential manner in accordance with the law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). Aside from these required disclosures, your confidentiality will be protected through the following procedures:

- Only the external facilitator will see the information about you from this study. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity and position of each participant. You will select a pseudonym prior to the start of the focus-group interview. Please be advised that although the researcher will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of the focus-group interview prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants, and not repeat what is said during the focus-group interview to others. The results of this study may be published in a scientific book/or journal or presented to other people. If this is done, your name will not be used so no one will know who you are. You would be referred to by your pseudonym. The data from the transcribed focus-group interview will be stored on a password-protected laptop until the study is complete, then will be stored on a password-protected flash drive in a locked cabinet in the supervising investigators' office for the required three years of retention. Information that is kept on computers will be kept safe from access by people who should not see it, through password-protection. Digital recordings will be deleted after transcriptions have been complete. At the end of the federally-required three-year period, all data will be destroyed.

Questions about the Study: If you have questions about the research study, you may contact the supervising investigator, Dr. Barbara Pazey, at Barbara.Pazey@unt.edu or the external facilitator, Dr. Christy Fiori at [REDACTED] or fioric@friscoisd.org or the student investigator, Brad Hunt, doctoral student, at [REDACTED] or BradHunt@my.unt.edu

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-4643 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Please sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Sign only after you have read all of the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

Research Participants' Rights:

Your participation in the survey confirms that you have read all of the above and that you agree to all of the following:

- Brad Hunt and/or Dr. Christi Fiori have explained the study to you and you have had an opportunity to contact him/her with any questions about the study. You have been informed of the possible benefits and the potential risks of the study.
- You understand that you do not have to take part in this study, and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.
- You understand why the study is being conducted and how it will be performed.
- You understand your rights as a research participant and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study.
- You understand you may print a copy of this form for your records.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining
Consent

Signature of Person Obtaining
Consent

Date

For the Investigator or Designee:

I certify that I have reviewed the contents of this form with the subject signing above. I have explained the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study. It is my opinion that the participant understood the explanation.

Signature of Investigator or Designee

Date

APPENDIX C

STUDENT INVESTIGATOR - INFORMED CONSENT NOTICE AND ADULT SUBJECTS

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

University of North Texas Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent Notice

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

Title of Study: Supportive Conditions for the Successful Development of Ninth-Grade Centers

Student Investigator: Brad Hunt, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Teacher Education and Administration. Supervising Investigator: Dr. Barbara Pazez, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Teacher Education and Administration. External Facilitator: Dr. Christy Fiori

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this case study is to determine how district and school leadership impact the successful development of ninth-grade centers. Through this case study, the effects of administrative support for teacher recruitment and training, the social and emotional needs of the students, and the physical design of the campus will be investigated. Through a focus-group interview comprised of teachers and staff, we hope to gain a broader understanding of the impact leadership has on these components will be obtained.

Study Procedures: If selected for participation, you will be asked to take part in a one-time in-depth interview conducted by an external facilitator, Dr. Christy Fiori. As the primary researcher, Brad Hunt is soliciting the services of Dr. Fiori to bracket himself from the data collection and provide a greater level of objectivity. The interview is expected to last approximately 60 minutes.

During the course of the study, you will be asked to participate in the following procedures:

- If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed one-on-one with the external facilitator, Dr. Fiori. You will self-select a pseudonym that will be used to protect your identity in the study. The interview will be set up at a time convenient for you. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded and notes will be taken. Brad Hunt will not listen to the audio recordings, to protect your identity. Mr. Hunt only will review the transcriptions of the recordings. You will be asked to review the analysis of the transcribed recordings to assure that the analysis accurately represents your input. The external facilitator will meet with you for this review. The information to be gleaned through the focus-group interview will be concentrated on the participants' viewpoints of the implementation of a ninth-grade center practices and procedures that make it successful.

Foreseeable Risks: The potential risks involved in this study are minimal and relate to the inconvenience of time. Although not expected, if you become uncomfortable during the interview you may decline to answer a question or withdraw completely from the study at any time without penalty.

Benefits to the Subjects and others:

- The benefits of participating in the study is expected to contribute to sharing what X ISD has learned about the development and implementation of a ninth-grade center which may potentially help other school districts in the future.

- You may not experience any personal benefits from participating in this study.

Compensation for Participants: You will receive bottled water and snacks as compensation for your participation. The total value of the refreshments is approximately \$30.00.

Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records: Information collected about you will be handled in a confidential manner in accordance with the law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). Aside from these required disclosures, your confidentiality will be protected through the following procedures:

- Only the external facilitator will see the information about you from this study. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity and position of each participant. You will select a pseudonym prior to the start of the interview. The results of this study may be published in a scientific book/or journal or presented to other people. If this is done, your name will not be used so no one will know who you are. You will be referred to by your pseudonym. The data from the transcribed interviews will be stored on a password-protected laptop until the study is complete, then will be stored on a password-protected flash drive in a locked cabinet in the supervising investigators' office for the required three years of retention. Information that is kept on computers will be kept safe from access by people who should not see it, through password-protection. Digital recordings will be deleted after transcriptions have been complete. At the end of the federally-required three-year period, all data will be destroyed.

Questions about the Study: If you have questions about the research study, you may contact the supervising investigator, Dr. Barbara Pazey, at Barbara.Pazey@unt.edu or the external facilitator, Dr. Christy Fiori at [REDACTED] or fioric@friscoisd.org or the student investigator, Brad Hunt, doctoral student, at [REDACTED] or BradHunt@my.unt.edu

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-4643 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Please sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Sign only after you have read all of the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

Research Participants' Rights:

Your participation in the survey confirms that you have read all of the above and that you agree to all of the following:

- *Brad Hunt and/or Dr. Christi Fiori* have explained the study to you and you have had an opportunity to contact him/her with any questions about the study. You have been informed of the possible benefits and the potential risks of the study.

- You understand that you do not have to take part in this study, and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.
- You understand why the study is being conducted and how it will be performed.
- You understand your rights as a research participant and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study.
- You understand you may print a copy of this form for your records.

Printed Name of Participant	Signature of Participant	Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent	Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Date

For the Investigator or Designee:

I certify that I have reviewed the contents of this form with the subject signing above. I have explained the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study. It is my opinion that the participant understood the explanation.

Signature of Investigator or Designee	Date

APPENDIX D

TEACHER AND COUNSELOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please tell me a little about your background as an educator.
2. In your opinion, what are the three most important elements of a successful transition to high school?
 - a. Follow up question: What processes has the campus or district administration put into place to assist with this transition?
3. What are the characteristics of ninth graders who appear to be adjusting well to school?
 - a. Follow up question: For those not adjusting well to school, what programs are in place to support their social/emotional and/or academic needs?
4. What do you feel makes a ninth-grade campus different from a ninth-twelfth-grade campus?
5. Tell me a little about your expectations for support from your campus and district administration.
6. What kinds of training were provided for you to meet the needs of ninth graders?
7. How are you supported by your administration?
8. How does the PLC process assist with supporting ninth-grade students?

APPENDIX E

ADMINISTRATOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please tell me a little about your background as an educator.
2. In your opinion, what are the three most important elements of a successful transition to high school?
 - a. Follow up question: What processes have you put into place to assist with this transition?
3. What are the characteristics of ninth graders who appear to be adjusting well to school?
4. What do you feel makes a ninth-grade campus different from a ninth-twelfth-grade campus?
5. What are the biggest challenges you feel students face when transitioning to high school from middle school?
6. What are the 3-4 essential processes used to create a ninth-grade center?
7. What kinds of training did you provide for your staff to meet the needs of ninth graders?
 - a. Follow up question: As an administrator, what type of training did you receive to help you meet the needs of ninth graders?
8. What key supports do you provide to teachers in the area of high school transition?
9. How does the PLC process assist with supporting ninth-grade students?
10. What programs are in place to assist ninth graders with their social and emotional development?

APPENDIX F

TEACHER AND COUNSELOR FOCUS-GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What is your perception of the processes used by the administration (both campus and district) to create the ninth-grade center?
2. What are the most meaningful components of the ninth-grade center that have the greatest impact on the student's transition from middle school?
3. What is the process that should be followed when selecting staff to work with ninth graders?
4. What type of activities/services/programs should be provided to ninth-grade teachers as they prepare to work with ninth graders?
5. Who should offer these activities/services/programs and when should they be offered?
6. What are the important critical elements in the design of the building or special configuration that would assist ninth graders with a smooth transition?
7. Are there any special considerations that should be considered with the grouping or scheduling of the teachers?
8. What type of impact would Professional Learning Communities have on the ninth-grade transition process?
9. What are the biggest social and emotional needs ninth graders experience when transitioning to high school and how should those needs be addressed?
10. What else would you like to share with me about the transition practices for your campus or district?

APPENDIX G

FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW ALIGNED TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RESEARCH QUESTION #1	DATA SOURCE – FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW
<p>What processes do district and campus level administrators use to create a ninth-grade center?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your perception of the processes used by the administration (both campus and district) to create the ninth-grade center? • What type of activities/services/programs should be provided to ninth-grade teachers as they prepare to work with ninth graders? • What type of impact would professional learning communities have on the ninth-grade transition process? • What else would you like to share with me about the transition practices for your campus or district?
RESEARCH QUESTION #2	DATA SOURCE – FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW
<p>What components of the ninth-grade center have the greatest impact on student success?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the most meaningful components of the ninth-grade center that have the greatest impact on the student’s transition from middle school? • What is the process that should be followed when selecting staff to work with ninth graders? • What type of activities/services/programs should be provided to ninth-grade teachers as they prepare to work with ninth graders? • Who should offer these activities/services/programs and when should they be offered? • What type of impact would professional learning communities have on the ninth-grade transition process? • What else would you like to share with me about the transition practices for your campus or district?
RESEARCH QUESTION #3	DATA SOURCE – FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW
<p>What perceptions do staff have regarding the process of students transitioning from middle school to the ninth-grade?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the most meaningful components of the ninth-grade center that have the greatest impact on the student’s transition from middle school? • What are the important critical elements in the design of the building or special configuration that would assist ninth graders with a smooth transition? • Are there any special considerations that should be considered with the grouping or scheduling of the teachers? • What else would you like to share with me about the transition practices for your campus or district?

APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ALIGNED TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RESEARCH QUESTION #1	DATA SOURCE – INTERVIEW
<p>What processes do district and campus level administrators use to create a ninth-grade center?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In your opinion, what are the three most important elements of a successful campus? • What processes have you put in place to assist with this transition? (ADMINISTRATORS ONLY) • What processes has the campus or district administration put into place to assist with this transition? (TEACHERS ONLY) • For those students not adjusting well to school, what programs are in place to support their social/emotional and/or academic needs? (TEACHERS ONLY) • What do you feel makes a ninth-grade campus different from a ninth-twelfth grade campus? • What are the biggest challenges you feel students face when transitioning to high school from middle school? (ADMINISTRATORS ONLY) • What are the 3-4 essential processes used to create a ninth-grade center? (ADMINISTRATORS ONLY) • What key supports do you provide to teachers in the area of high school transition? (ADMINISTRATORS ONLY) • How are you supported by your administration? (TEACHERS ONLY) • What programs are in place to assist ninth graders with their social and emotional development?
RESEARCH QUESTION #2	DATA SOURCE – INTERVIEW
<p>What components of the ninth-grade center have the greatest impact on student success?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me a little about your expectations for support from your campus and district administration. (TEACHERS ONLY) • What kinds of training were provided for you to meet the needs of ninth graders? (TEACHERS ONLY) • What kinds of training did you provide for your staff to meet the needs of ninth graders? (ADMINISTRATORS ONLY) • As an administrator, what type of training did you receive to help you meet the needs of ninth graders? (ADMINISTRATORS ONLY) • How are you supported by your administration? (TEACHERS ONLY) • How does the PLC process assist with supporting ninth-grade students?
RESEARCH QUESTION #3	DATA SOURCE – INTERVIEW
<p>What perceptions do staff have regarding the process of students transitioning from</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the characteristics of ninth graders that appear to be adjusting well to school? • What are the 3-4 essential processes used to create a ninth-grade center?

middle school to the ninth-grade?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you feel makes a ninth-grade campus different from a ninth to twelfth-grade campus?• Tell me a little about your expectations for support from your campus and district administration. (TEACHERS ONLY)• How are you supported by your administration? (TEACHERS ONLY)• How does the PLC process assist with supporting of ninth-grade students?
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APPENDIX I

CAMPUS GUIDING PURPOSE AND LEARNER PROFILE

Campus Guiding Purpose & Learner Profile

Guiding Purpose

All learners achieve personal growth and emerge as future-ready learners who positively impact
our world.

Belong ~ Empower ~ Challenge

Build Everyday Champions

Learner Profile

Communicates

Solves Problems

Connects

Displays Resilience

Embodies Integrity

Demonstrates Compassion

Leads by Serving

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