GRADE SHIFT: HOW PARKERSBURG HIGH SCHOOL NINTH GRADERS FEEL ABOUT BEING TRANSITIONED FROM JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

In the 2008-2009 school year, Wood County Schools went from having junior high schools with grades seven through nine to true middle schools with grade six moving from the elementary schools to the newly formed middle schools and grade nine moving up to the high schools. Although there is a lot of research pertaining to how parents, teachers, and administrators feel about how grades should be divided among schools, there is little to no research about how students feel the grades should be divided. This study aimed to find out how Parkersburg High School ninth grade students felt about being transitioned from a junior high school setting up to high school. Parental consent was sought. Surveys were handed out to find out how the ninth graders felt about attending Parkersburg High School. Aspects that might have influenced these feelings were also examined. Through this research, perhaps more light can be shed about how the grades should be divided among schools and how to ease the transition between schools.
Dedicated to my family
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

*Statement of the Problem*

Moving from one school to another can be exciting, but at the same time stressful. Now imagine learning that the grade divisions that have been in place for awhile are now changing. This could cause even more stress for students. This exact situation took place in the Wood County School System in West Virginia. This school system recently decided to change their educational structure. Beginning in the 2008-2009 school year, the sixth grade was no longer going to be in the elementary schools, and the junior high schools ceased to exist. Instead, true middle schools were implemented with the sixth grade moving to these newly formed middle schools and the ninth grade moving from the old junior high schools up to the high schools. Students were not given any say as to how they believed that the grades should be divided among the schools, and yet it was their education that was being affected. Therefore, the students needed to have the chance to express how they felt about the recent grade shift.

*Justification for the Research Problem*

This researcher attended schools that had grades six through eight in the middle schools (Peters Township Middle School and Medway Middle School) and grades nine through twelve in the high school (Medway High School). Having not been experienced in any different educational setup, this researcher was surprised when moving from Medway, Massachusetts to Vienna, West Virginia to learn that the elementary schools contained grades kindergarten through six and that instead of middle schools, there were
junior high schools that contained grades seven through nine. Finally, the high schools had grades ten through twelve. When it was discovered that Wood County Schools would be moving from junior high schools containing grades seven through nine to middle schools containing grades six through eight, this researcher heard concerns from some parents. There were parents that thought sixth graders were not ready for the middle school and that they still needed to be in their nurturing elementary schools. This researcher also heard the opinions of junior high school educators that believed that the ninth graders were too mature for the junior high school setting and that they were ready to be up at the high schools. Perhaps the sixth graders may want to stay in elementary schools; however, there is uncertainty about how the ninth grade students feel about being in the high school rather than in junior high schools.

*Deficiencies in the Evidence*

While there was a plethora of research regarding how parents, teachers, administrators, and educational researchers feel grades should be divided in schools, there was little to no research regarding how students feel the grades should be divided (Alexander, 1964; Beane & Lipka, 2006; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Bunting, 2005; Chaker, 2005; Gruhn, 1961; Gulino & Valentine, 1999; McEwin, 1983; Scherer, 2006; Yecke, 2006; Wallis, Miranda, & Rubiner, 2005). Not only was there the debate about whether there should be junior high schools or middle schools, but there was also an argument for not even having these schools for the middle grades and having the arrangement of kindergarten through eighth grade in one school and nine through twelve in another (Bunting, 2005; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Chaker, 2005; Scherer, 2006; Yecke, 2006; Wallis, et al., 2005). The research that was found about how students feel the schools
should be divided was mainly about whether the grade arrangement should be kindergarten through eighth grade in one school and nine through twelve in another or whether there should be a separate school for the middle grades, either a junior high school or a middle school (Wallis, et al., 2005). There was no research about how students feel about whether there should be middle schools containing grades six through eight or junior high schools containing grades seven through nine. Also, the students that were asked whether they prefer kindergarten through eighth grade schools or a school for the middle grades were students that were in grades six through eight (Wallis, et al., 2005). Ninth graders were not asked their opinions as to what school they felt they should be in.

Relating the Discussion to the Audience

Since this new grade arrangement was new to Wood County Schools and perhaps to many of the citizens of Wood County if they lived here all their lives, it was important to inform everyone about this grade shift and find out how students really felt about it. It was also vital that the transition from one school to another be made as smoothly as possible. In order to ease the transition from elementary schools to middle schools, programs such as Tour de Jackson, designed to ease the transition from elementary schools to Jackson Middle School, were the methods used to make the move as smooth as possible. There was also orientation at Parkersburg High School (PHS) for the ninth graders. Perhaps there could be other ways to make this transition easier besides orientations. Methods such as having a buddy in one of the upper grades to help you out and answer your questions or even discussion groups where the new students can ask the older students questions and to have their fears eased could also facilitate the transition.
This researcher hoped that by asking the ninth graders their opinions that methods such as the ones listed or even others could be found that administrators at the schools could implement to ease transitions.

*Purpose Statement*

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine how freshmen feel about being ninth graders in high school rather than in junior high school and what factors were contributing to these feelings for ninth graders at Parkersburg High School.

*Research Questions*

What does transition mean? What are the feelings of freshmen about being ninth graders in high school rather than in junior high school for ninth graders at Parkersburg High School? This researcher strove to find out the answer to these questions by asking freshmen students at Parkersburg High School questions regarding how they first felt when they found out they would be a ninth grader in the high school rather than in junior high school. Also, the researcher asked whether or not they attended the orientation and asked the students to recommend ways for easing the transition to high school. Next, the researcher determined whether the student knew someone that is currently attending Parkersburg High School or attended Parkersburg High School and whether they talked to that person to see if the acquaintance could have had an influence on the students’ feelings about attending Parkersburg High School. Finally, the researcher determined whether the students’ feelings have changed since their first day at Parkersburg High School.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Evolution of School Structure

The 8-4 plan, where eight grades were in one school and four grades were in secondary school, was popular following the Civil War (McEwin, 1983). However, in the 1890s the National Education Association concluded that college preparatory courses should begin before high school, and this was not possible with the current 8-4 school structure (Hall, Quinn, and Gollnick, 2008). Psychologist G. Stanley Hall also argued early adolescents are neither children nor adults, and so should have a separate special education (Hall, et al., 2008). Adolescents need to have a place of learning where they will not be influenced by older, more mature students, but yet they will not be babied and left too long in elementary schools (Hall, et al., 2008). Junior high schools were developed due to these issues (Hall, et al., 2008).

Rise of Junior High Schools

The first junior high schools opened in response to social conditions of the time (Hall, et al., 2008). In 1910, elementary schools were overcrowded due to the large influx of immigrant children coming to the United States (Hall, et al., 2008). There was also a problem with students not earning the grades needed to pass on to the next grade, and so they had to stay in elementary school longer (Hall, et al., 2008). Therefore, junior high schools were opened in order to deal with the overcrowding issue as well as provide a special education for adolescents (Hall, et al., 2008).

Junior high schools were often attached to high schools and contained grades seven through nine (Hall, et al., 2008; McEwin, 1983). By 1960, four out five high
school students had attended junior high school (Hall, et al., 2008). In the 1960s, there were 6,000 junior high schools in the United States (Hall, et al., 2008). However, by 2001, the number of junior high schools declined to 632 (Hall, et al., 2008).

*Fall of Junior High Schools*

The discontent with junior high schools started in the 1960s (McEwin, 1983). Besides dealing with overcrowding, the other main goal of providing a special education for adolescents was not met (McEwin, 1983). Junior high schools just ended up being a miniature version of the high school (McEwin, 1983). Also, some educators believed that ninth graders were too mature to be in junior high schools (McEwin, 1983). These issues ultimately led to the decline in the number of junior high schools in the United States (McEwin, 1983).

*Rise of Middle Schools*

Despite the failure of junior high schools, educators still believed that early adolescents deserved an education that was different from elementary and secondary schools (Hall, et al., 2008). Just like junior high schools, middle schools evolved due to happenings of the times (Hall, et al., 2008). This time the Baby Boom generation was overcrowding the elementary schools (Hall, et al., 2008). Also, in the 1950s, research from England reported that the average age for puberty had decreased from twelve to fifteen years old to ten to fourteen years old (Hall, et al., 2008).

In 1963, William Alexander proposed a new organization for schools (McEwin, 1983). The new school for early adolescents would be called middle schools (McEwin, 1983). Middle schools would be defined as having at least three grades and not more than five grades (Hall, et al., 2008; McEwin, 1983). Some arrangements that developed
due to this new organization have been grades five through eight and the most popular arrangement, of grades six through eight in middle schools (Hall, et al., 2008; McEwin, 1983). Another aspect was that the ninth grade was moved up to the high school (McEwin, 1983).

Middle schools are characterized by having more flexible scheduling, more team teaching, less ability grouping, fewer sports programs, and more uniform requirements for classes than its predecessor, the junior high school (McEwin, 1983). By 2001, there were over 13,000 middle schools in the United States (Hall, et al., 2008). However, many of the junior high schools that still exist are starting to adopt some of the middle school concepts, and so there are fewer differences between these two school models (McEwin, 1983).

*Back to the 8-4 model?*

In the late 1990s, a few large, urban districts decided to go back to the kindergarten through eight, nine through twelve organization that was popular during the Civil War (Chaker, 2005). These school districts made this change due to research that showed that preteen students do better when they remain in their familiar elementary schools longer (Chaker, 2005). There is evidence that students attending K-8 schools have less anxiety, higher test scores, and fewer behavioral issues than students attending middle school (Chaker, 2005).

K-8 schools able to foster stronger teacher-student relationships because the students attend the school for so long allowing the teachers to know every student in the school (Wallis, et al., 2005). Also, the older students are put in positions where they can exercise judgment and leadership something that might not be possible if they were a
student in a middle school (Wallis, et al., 2005). The older students can be mentors and tutors for the younger students (Wallis, et al., 2005). Finally, the older students also realize that they need to exhibit good behavior for the little kids, which is thought to be the reason why there are fewer behavior problems in K-8 schools as compared to middle schools (Chaker, 2005). However, the K-8 movement is still relatively small with about 5,000 K-8 schools reported in 2005 (Chaker, 2005).

**Disadvantages of the K-8 model**

Despite all the positives of the K-8 model, there are some disadvantages that need to be mentioned. Since K-8 schools are so small, not as many extracurricular activities can be offered (Chaker, 2005). Also, not as broad a range of classes such as foreign language and various levels of math can be taught at the school (Chaker, 2005). Some K-8 schools rely on computer programs to teach some classes that they cannot offer to their students (Chaker, 2005). Finally, there is the all-important question of whether students that attend K-8 schools are really prepared for high school (Wallis, et al., 2005). Since K-8 schools are not able to offer as many classes, are these students prepared academically? (Chaker, 2005; Wallis, et al., 2005). Also, moving from a small, tight-knit school to a big high school could be shocking for students that attended a K-8 school (Wallis, et al., 2005).

**The Ninth Grade “Problem”**

The disappearance of seven through nine junior high schools meant that ninth graders would move up to the high school (George & McEwin, 1999). Since most high school educators did not want the ninth grade students to be in the high schools, there was really no careful planning for the new ninth graders’ arrival at the high school
Many ninth grade students demonstrate the following behaviors when they attend high school: poor attendance, tardiness to school and classes, more disturbances and disruptions than students in other grades which lead to more suspensions and expulsions, poor academic achievement, and higher drop-out numbers than students in other grades (George & McEwin, 1999). Eventually, high school educators realized that ninth grade students were probably staying in the high schools, and so decided that something needed to be done to ease the transition from middle school to high school (George & McEwin, 1999).

**Transition Strategies**

Many transition strategies have been tried in order to ease the transition from middle school to high school. The transition strategies that are mentioned below are ones that students felt were the best at helping make the move from middle school to high school as smooth and stress-free as possible (Mizelle, 2005).

One strategy was to have a spring orientation where students and parents can ask questions (Mizelle, 2005). The orientation could either be held at the middle school or the high school and questions can be asked of administrators, teachers, and students (Mizelle, 2005).

The next strategy was to have student shadowing where an eighth grade student follows a ninth grade student for a day to see what a typical day at the high school is like (Mizelle, 2005). This also made it so that when the eighth grade student attended high school they already knew someone at the school (Mizelle, 2005). Another option besides student shadowing was to have the eighth graders take a field trip to the high school (Mizelle, 2005). This would allow the students to learn a little bit about the layout of the
building so that they would have a better idea of where to go when they attend high school next school year (Mizelle, 2005).

One of the most popular transition strategies was having a beginning-of-school orientation (Mizelle, 2005). This would be a time where students would be able to interact with their fellow classmates and ask questions of older students and teachers (Mizelle, 2005). The students could also get their schedules, “walk through their day”, and possibly meet some of their teachers before school starts (Mizelle, 2005). When the first day of school comes, the student would know where they were going which would ease their anxiety (Mizelle, 2005).

Many ninth grade students have poor academic achievement when they attend high school (George & McEwin, 1999). With the pressure to perform well in class and so many things to do and that need to be completed, many ninth grade students were overwhelmed (Mizelle, 2005). Many ninth graders do not know how to manage their time in order to complete everything that they need to (Mizelle, 2005). Ninth graders also usually have problems with their study skills (Mizelle, 2005). Classes in time management and study skills would help ninth graders transition academically into high school (Mizelle, 2005).

Finally, it was also important that the new students have the opportunity to build relationships with some of the older students at the high school since ninth graders that know someone at the high school and feel welcome were less likely to drop out of school (Mizelle, 2005). One method that could be used to build relationships would be to have an older student paired up with a ninth grader (Mizelle, 2005). The older student could communicate with their buddy through e-mail, phone, or face-to-face meetings at least
once a week in order to answer questions their buddy might have or to offer words of advice and encouragement (Mizelle, 2005). Another method would be to have freshmen group meetings with older students and maybe a teacher once a week where again any issues can be discussed and questions can be answered (Mizelle, 2005).
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Gaining Permission for Research

In order to conduct this research, permission from many different parties was obtained. First, permission from the Human Subjects Committee at Marietta College was obtained. This researcher completed an online course about the Ethics of Research in order to make sure that the study was completed as ethically as possible and to fulfill a requirement for the approval for the research from the Human Subjects Committee. Since this research involved minors under the age of eighteen, a Long Review Form was completed and turned into the Human Subjects Committee. Finally, after approval had been gained from the Human Subjects Committee, the researcher informed the principal of Parkersburg High School, Mr. Ralph Board about the study since he was to serve as the gatekeeper for this research. Parental permission was sought since the research participants were minors, and informed consent was obtained from the participants (See Figure 1 in the Appendix for the Information sheet given to the research participants and See Figure 2 in the Appendix for the Informed Consent Form given to the parents and research participants).

Research Site

Parkersburg is a city in Wood County, West Virginia located at the confluence of the Little Kanawha River the Ohio River. Parkersburg has a population of approximately 33,000. There are three high schools that serve the city of Parkersburg: Parkersburg High School, Parkersburg South High School, and Parkersburg Catholic High Schools. The
following middle schools feed into PHS: Jackson, VanDevender, and Hamilton. About 1,450 students attend PHS, making it the largest high school in the state of West Virginia.

Research Participants

The research participants for this study were ninth grade students who attended Parkersburg High School during the 2008-2009 school year. Twenty ninth grade students (ten males and ten females) were given a survey with open-ended questions to complete that took into account factors that could contribute to their feelings about being ninth graders at PHS. The survey contained questions that asked for methods that the students could suggest to ease the transition between middle school and high school. Since this was a qualitative study, the twenty participants were purposely selected according to the ease of the researcher’s access to these students as well as through snowball sampling.

Involvement in this study was totally voluntary and the subjects were under no obligation to participate. A research participant was able to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. Because names were not required on the survey, complete anonymity was assured. The signed permission slip was kept with the completed survey only for the purpose of identification for withdrawal from the study if the need should have arose. Gender might have been a contributing factor to the research participant’s feelings, and so it was asked on the survey.

Procedure

After all of the necessary permissions were obtained, the researcher gave the researcher-generated survey with open-ended questions to twenty research subjects regarding factors that would contribute to their feelings about being ninth graders at Parkersburg High School. These students had the opportunity to suggest methods to ease
the transition between middle school and high school (See Figure 3 in the Appendix for the Survey). The survey was given at the end of March/beginning of April, and the students had a week to obtain permission and complete the survey. The survey was in paper and pencil format and took no more than ten minutes for the students to complete.

Once the surveys were completed, the researcher read them and coded the surveys. After the coding process, the researcher’s themes were developed. The themes were validated through the responses that the research participants provided to the questions on the survey. These themes were discussed and the researcher’s opinions were mentioned regarding the educational structure of Wood County School Systems in West Virginia and why students might have responded the way they did to questions.

*Limitations of Research*

A characteristic of qualitative research is that it is not able to have its findings generalized to another setting or population because of the purposeful selection of participants, the small number of research participants, and the unique research site situation. The fact that Wood County Schools moved the ninth grade up to the high school is a unique situation since many school districts in the United States already have the ninth grade at the high school level. If this researcher asked freshmen from a school district where the ninth grade had been in the high school for a long time, there might have been different responses to the survey questions, which in turn would have caused different themes to be developed. Another factor was these ninth graders only knew what it was like to be a ninth grader at the high school level and not the junior high school level. Therefore, the research participants had no comparison to go by except their previous grade experience in junior high school while they were in seventh grade and
eighth grade. This means that the participants were basing their responses on what they thought it would have been like to be a ninth grader in junior high school compared to being one in high school.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This qualitative study looked to determine how Parkersburg High School ninth graders felt about being transitioned from junior high school to high school. The answer to this question and the factors that could have contributed to these feelings was determined by distributing a survey with open-ended questions. The students were asked about their feelings when they first found out they would be a ninth grader at Parkersburg High School rather than in a junior high school setting and how they currently felt about attending Parkersburg High School. Factors such as their opinions on the orientation, other strategies that could be used to ease the transition from middle school to high school, and comments heard about Parkersburg High School from community members were also asked on the survey since these factors could also contribute to their feelings. Finally, the students were asked their gender and what junior high school they attended because these factors could have also determined feelings about attending Parkersburg High School.

A small sample size of twenty students was selected in order to get the in depth and personal answers that this researcher was looking for. Out of the twenty surveys handed out, fifteen surveys (six males = three from Hamilton Junior High School and three from Jackson Junior High School and nine females = one from Hamilton Junior High School, eight from Jackson Junior High School) were completed. These surveys were coded by examining the responses to a single question on each survey. This process was continued until the responses to each question were examined. Themes were
developed and were validated based on the responses that the participants provided on the survey.

**Qualitative Themes**

**Theme One**

*Females had more negative feelings when they first found out they would be ninth graders at Parkersburg High School rather than at their junior high school while males had mixed feelings or positive feelings.*

**Females**

- “I was upset at first.”
- “I was very upset. I was really looking forward to being a 9th grader at Jackson and I was so nervous because PHS is a humungous school.”
- “When I first found out that I would attending PHS as a ninth grader I felt somewhat worried. I didn’t know how the change would be.”
- “I was a little scared at first.”
- “I was mad and disappointed.”
- “I was a little disappointed because I couldn’t be the head of the school.”

**Males**

- “I was excited because I really wanted to play high school sports.”
- “Excited that we were supposed to be the first freshman class but also disappointed to lose out of my 9th grade year at Hamilton.”
- “I was kind of pumped because I like PHS.”
- “I was excited.”
- “I had mixed feelings, but I was ready.”
Theme Two

Orientation was attended to find out where their classes are and/or meet their teachers

- “To get to know the school and where my classes are”
- “I wanted to know my teachers and where stuff was”
- “To find my classes and meet teachers”
- “I attended it so I would know where my classes are, and meet some of my teachers.”
- “I wanted to know how to get to my classes and learn the school.”
- “So I would know where to go and what to do”
- “I attended the orientation so that I could see where all my classrooms were and where my locker was.”
- “I attended orientation to see where my classes would be and how to get to them.”
- “So I would be able to get to my classes”
- “I attended the orientation because it gave me a chance to find where my classrooms are and other areas in the school.”
- “To learn more about the school, and get to see it and find my classrooms”

Theme Three

Orientation was helpful for students to have the opportunity to find their classes

- “I learned where everything was”
- “I got to walk around”
-“The orientation had people to get to know their classes and people.”

-“It was helpful because I knew where to go on the first day and didn’t get lost.”

-“It was helpful because it helped me find my classes.”

-“If I didn’t go, I wouldn’t know where my classes are.”

-“We could see our new teachers and walk the hallways.”

-“It was helpful in that it helped me find my classes.”

-“I knew how to get to my classes”

-“I knew where I was going”

**Theme Four**

*Orientation was not helpful because of the amount of people, disorganization, and not being able to meet teachers*

-“It was so crowded in the halls that I couldn’t remember to get anywhere.”

-“I didn’t think that the orientation was helpful because there wasn’t enough time to look around. I also wish that I could’ve gotten a chance to meet with my teachers.”

-“I don’t think the orientation was very helpful because all it was were people walking around the crowded halls confused and lost.”

-“No, it wasn’t. There should have been room numbers and teachers there and not stuff in the hallway.”

-“No, not at all. Have numbers on the door”

-“It was very crowded”
-“I felt it was a little disorganized”

**Theme Five**

*Changes need to be made to orientation in order to make it more productive*

-“It would be nice if we went in groups of kids.”

-“I think that if the time was used more wisely then people wouldn’t have been lost and confused.”

-“There should have been room numbers and teachers there and not stuff in the hallways”

-“More time is needed to look around. I wish I could’ve gotten a chance to meet with my teachers.”

-“The hallways need to be less crowded.”

-“There should have be not as many people at a time because it was very crowded.”

-“Having a longer orientation”

-“It needs to be better organized.”

-“Numbers need to be on the doors.”

**Theme Six**

*In addition to orientation, there are other strategies that could be utilized to ease the transition from middle school to high school*

-“Definitely joining a sports team. That way, you get to know a lot of girls and it makes you more comfortable I think.”

-“Joining sports or other clubs”
“I think that guest speakers, students that have attended PHS, should talk about their experience at PHS to open the eyes of the upcoming ninth graders and show them what being a Big Red is all about.”

“Having the year previous ninth graders to go talk to some of the kids”

“It would be helpful if they had a dance with all the upcoming 9th graders.”

“Do a dance like we did before the school year”

“I think starting out the year with less homework and giving us a few days to come and view the school before school starts.”

**Theme Seven**

*Parkersburg High School has an overall positive report in the community*

“My brother attended PHS, and loved it. He was class valedictorian, and he got an academic scholarship.”

“My sister told me that it was a great school.”

“My grandma attended PHS. She said that it’s the best school around and still is.”

“Everyone that I know loves PHS. I heard this from my cousins and friends.”

“I heard it was a great school.”

“My sister, a junior at PHS, told me that PHS is a good learning experience and there are many great teachers.”

“My three sisters loved their experiences at PHS. They said they had good teachers and were treated liked adults.”
-“I have heard it’s a great school from my brother.”

-“They liked PHS and going there for high school”

-“My friends indicate that they are comfortable in the school.”

-“I heard from my cousin that it was easy and you can do so much stuff.

More freedom”

**Theme Eight**

*Maturity is the key factor for feeling ready to attend Parkersburg High School as a ninth grader*

-“I believe that I was prepared to attend PHS because I am mature and was ready for a more challenging learning experience.”

-“We are all very mature enough to handle going up to PHS.”

-“I feel that I was ready to face the high school world because I’m pretty mature.”

-“I think that I was ready, but I think some were not mature enough.”

-“You should be starting to be treated like an adult around the age of 15-16.”

**Theme Nine**

*Feeling comfortable and knowing the way around are the main reasons why feelings have changed from being negative when they first found out they would be ninth graders at Parkersburg High School to positive now that they have attended Parkersburg High School*

-“I now know where everything is in PHS. I think it’s small now and very easy to get around.”
- “I like it so much more now and I’m way more comfortable.”
- “I was kind of nervous, now I feel very comfortable here.”
- “I am very comfortable going to this school everyday.”
- “I used to think it was so huge, but now I know my way around fine and I also am starting to meet many of the people there.”
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Having not been experienced in any different educational setup, this researcher was surprised when moving from Medway, Massachusetts to Vienna, West Virginia to learn that the elementary schools contained grades kindergarten through six and that instead of middle schools, there were junior high schools that contained grades seven through nine. Finally, the high schools had grades ten through twelve. This grade division did not make sense. This researcher thought that sixth graders were too mature to be in the elementary schools and that ninth graders should be in the high school in order to prepare them for college. When it was discovered that Wood County Schools would be moving from junior high schools containing grades seven through nine to middle schools containing grades six through eight, this researcher saw no problem with the grade arrangement and was open to the idea.

When this researcher was preparing to attend Medway High School as a ninth grader, there was a small orientation where the students were divided into smaller groups and were escorted by upperclassmen through the hallways. This orientation was somewhat helpful in helping familiarize the new students with the school, but there was no opportunity to actually find individual classrooms. This researcher went on her own time and went through her schedule in order to find her classes, the best way to get to each class, and when were good times to go to her locker. Every year of high school, this researcher went to the school to walk through her schedule in order to find her classes despite having been there previous years. Walking though the schedule just helped this
researcher feel more comfortable and confident when the first day of school rolled around since she knew where her classes were located.

Explanation of Themes

Theme One

*Females had more negative feelings when they first found out they would be ninth graders at Parkersburg High School rather than at their junior high school while males had mixed feelings or positive feelings.*

This researcher believes that females had more negative feelings toward attending Parkersburg High School as a ninth grader because of how social females are. Some of the girls could have been concerned that they were not going to have classes with their friends or even see them since many of the girls commented that Parkersburg High School is such a large school. One female even commented that the reason that she attended orientation was “I wanted to walk around the school to try to get to know my classes a little better. And I wanted to know if I had classes with my friends.” Teenage girls rely on their friends for support. Not knowing if you will see your friends during school, especially when put into a new environment, can really hurt a teenage girl’s self-confidence and raise their anxiety.

Another reason that females tended to have negative feelings toward attending Parkersburg High School was because they did not get to have the opportunity to have a ninth grade prom when they were at the junior high school. This researcher is sure that some of these girls were really looking forward to their ninth grade prom and were disappointed to learn that they would not have one. Therefore, these females perhaps feel left out and that it was unfair for them not to have a ninth grade prom. They were denied
the chance to be the “head” of the school and instead went to the bottom of the heap again.

The males, on the other hand, were for the most part very optimistic about attending Parkersburg High School. Since teenage boys tend to love playing sports, this researcher believes that some of the males were probably looking forward to playing sports in a more competitive setting. They wanted to have the opportunity to challenge themselves and to proudly represent Parkersburg High School.

Those males that had mixed feelings about attending Parkersburg High School said that they were excited to attend Parkersburg High School, but that they were disappointed that they would not have their time to be “top dog” at their junior high school. Some males like to feel in charge and these ninth graders missed out on being the top class at their school and all of the perks that goes with it.

**Theme Two**

*Orientation was attended to find out where their classes are and/or meet their teachers*

Having been in these students’ shoes before when it comes to transitioning to high school, this researcher knows how these students must have felt. They were probably really nervous and wanted to make sure that they knew exactly where they were going, especially due to the large size of Parkersburg High School. They wanted to make sure that they were prepared and that they were not late to any of their classes because of the impression they would make on the teacher and because of the punishment they could receive for being late. Therefore, by attending the orientation, the students hoped to
resolve some of these issues, ease their nervousness, and be as prepared as they possibly could.

These students also wanted to meet their teachers. They wanted to have the opportunity to acquire a first impression of their teachers and to find out what their teachers expected of them. Meeting the teachers that they would have before school actually started would allow the students to ease some nervousness that the students would have felt on the first day and to not overwhelm the students with so many new things.

**Theme Three**

*Orientation was helpful for students to have the opportunity to find their classes*

The main reason that these students attended the orientation was to find out where their classes were. From examining the students’ responses, it seems that the majority of them felt that the orientation did indeed help them find out where their classes were going to be. It is important that students be given the opportunity to find their classes so that they can feel more comfortable in the school and to get a feel for the school. Nothing is worse than panicking on the first day of school because you are lost and are late to class. This situation stays on the student’s mind for awhile and affects the rest of their day in a negative manner. It also makes the wrong first impression on a teacher. By having the orientation, it provided the incoming freshmen with just the opportunity they needed to avoid being lost and to be on time for class.

**Theme Four**

*Orientation was not helpful because of the amount of people, disorganization, and not being able to meet teachers*
Although the orientation did provide the opportunity to find classes, there were some aspects of orientation that it did not make it as helpful as it could have been. Some of the students commented that it was really crowded in the hallways and that they were not able to find their classes due to all the chaos from all the people randomly walking in the hallways. This is not the situation that the incoming freshmen should have been placed in when they are having their first opportunity to get a feel for the school. It is important that they felt comfortable in their new school and that they had the opportunity to soak everything in, and not put in such a hectic situation.

The students were also disappointed that they did not have the opportunity to meet their teachers. Like it was mentioned earlier, the students really wanted to get an impression of what their teachers were going to be like and learn what was expected of them. The students could have also had the opportunity to discuss any issues that they felt the teacher ought to know. The teacher could also acquire an impression of the students that will be in their class and prepare accordingly. It is a win-win situation for both the students and the teachers because it would help ease some of the tension and nerves that the students feel on the first day and allow the teacher to prepare better.

**Theme Five**

*Changes need to be made to orientation in order to make it more productive*

The students had many suggestions to make the orientation better and more productive. One suggestion was to make the orientation longer. Some of the students said that they felt rushed and were not given a chance to really absorb everything. By making the orientation longer, the students will have the opportunity to take their time and learn what they need to know which will make them feel more comfortable at school.
Since the students said that the orientation was too crowded, it was suggested that fewer people should have been at the orientation. This could be achieved by splitting the freshmen class and having two or maybe even three orientations. Another possibility suggested would be to have the students walk around in smaller groups. Both of these situations would make the hallways less crowded, less chaotic, and allow the students to find their classrooms. And again, by knowing where their classrooms are, the students will feel more comfortable and prepared on the first day of school.

There was another suggestion to make the orientation more organized. Many of the students mentioned that there were no numbers on the doorways and that there were boxes in the hallway. Parkersburg High School was still under construction at that point, so this could be why the numbers were not on the doorways and there were boxes in the hallways, which hopefully would make this the only time students will have to experience this at orientation. However, the students were still very upset about this. They could not find their classes because the numbers were not on the doors. Also, not only was it crowded in the hallways with all of the people, but there was also boxes in the hallway, making it hard to maneuver around the halls. The school should have been better prepared for the orientation. The boxes should have been placed in areas where they would not have been in the way so that people could have moved easily through the halls. The numbers should have been put on the doors, even if they were just taped on the doors until the real numbers could be put up. The students were already under stress, and the school not being prepared for the orientation put the students under more stress that they did not need.
The final suggestion that the students offered was that there should have been teachers at the orientation. The students wanted teachers to be there so that they could have help finding their way around the school and so that they could meet the teachers. By having the teachers at the orientation, it would show the students that the teachers at Parkersburg High School are caring, and the students will feel welcome at Parkersburg High School. As mentioned earlier, by having teachers at the orientation, the students would be able to get an impression of their teacher and allow them to figure out the teachers’ expectations. Finally, it is important that the students feel welcome at Parkersburg High School so that they will feel comfortable.

**Theme Six**

_In addition to orientation, there are other strategies that could be utilized to ease the transition from middle school to high school_

Although changes being made to the orientation could help ease the transition, other strategies of making the transition smoother were made by the students. Some of the students suggested that the incoming freshmen should join sports teams and/or clubs when entering high school. By joining sports teams and/or clubs, the ninth graders would meet other ninth graders as well as the upperclassmen. The freshmen will have the opportunity to make friends and can ask the upperclassmen for advice if needed. One of the research papers examined mentioned that freshmen were less likely to drop out of school if they formed relationships with upperclassmen (Mizelle, 2005). So, by joining a sports team and/or club, the freshmen have the chance to form relationships with the upperclassmen and are more likely to stay in school and feel welcome.
Another recommendation made by some of the students was to have some of the upperclassmen from Parkersburg High School speak to the upcoming ninth graders. The upperclassmen can let the new students know what it is like to attend Parkersburg High School. The students will have the opportunity to ask questions to the upperclassmen. Having the upperclassmen come to speak to the new students will show the upcoming freshmen that these upperclassmen survived and that they can too. It is just another way that they upperclassmen can help ease the anxiety that the new freshmen are experiencing.

**Theme Seven**

*Parkersburg High School has an overall positive report in the community*

Many of the students that took this survey heard great things about Parkersburg High School. The most common comments were that friends and family loved it at PHS and that it is a great school. One student said they heard from their sister that PHS offers a good learning experience and there are great teachers. While another student stated that, “My grandma attended PHS. She said that it’s the best school around and still is.” This positive reputation is great for students that are to be attending Parkersburg High School. This researcher is not saying that anything bad about Parkersburg High School should not be said, but most of the students only hearing positive comments is reassuring for those students that Parkersburg High School is a good school. This will make the students feel comfortable about being at Parkersburg High School.

However, this researcher was pretty surprised about how many positive comments there were about Parkersburg High School. This researcher had really only heard negative comments about Parkersburg High School from some of the students that
attended Parkersburg High School. Some of the comments heard were about the fights that occur, the number of students that skip classes, the bomb threats, and the disrespectfulness of the students. This researcher is not sure if many of the people just did not want to mention these negative aspects and were trying to paint a glowing picture of Parkersburg High School or if they had not heard about these negative comments.

**Theme Eight**

*Maturity is the key factor for feeling ready to attend Parkersburg High School as a ninth grader*

Many of the students just stated that they felt mature enough to attend Parkersburg High School. This is something that the students felt themselves and was not measured by anyone. However, this does not mean that everyone is ready to attend Parkersburg High School. This researcher is sure that some teachers would say that there are some students that they feel are just not ready or mature enough to be at Parkersburg High School. Even some of the research participants recognized that there are some students that should not be at Parkersburg High School. One student stated, “Unfortunately, there is a massive number of students in the ninth grade that don’t belong in PHS. Most of them do not care about their academics and are disrespectful to the school faculty.” Another student stated that he felt that he was ready to attend PHS, but that there were some students that are just not mature enough. However, there is no other option at the moment but to send these immature, disrespectful, uncaring students that disrupt the rest of the learning community to Parkersburg High School. It is a shame that the students that work hard and are mature have to be with students that are immature and do not care.
Theme Nine

Feeling comfortable and knowing the way around are the main reasons why feelings have changed from being negative when they first found out they would be ninth graders at Parkersburg High School to positive now that they have attended Parkersburg High School

Since the students have attended Parkersburg High School for about seven months since this survey was completed, it was expected that the students would feel more comfortable at Parkersburg High School and that they would know their way around now. They have their set routines. They have met people and have hopefully made friends. This just shows that given the time and opportunity to adjust, the students’ can change from being negative to being positive about their educational situation. However, anything that can ease the tension and hasten the adjustment period still needs to be kept in place and not forgotten about.

Future Research

There are many areas of this study that could be changed to have made this research better. More students could have been selected to take this survey. This could have allowed for more variety in the responses. Having a more people complete the survey would have more fully represented the opinions of the freshmen population at Parkersburg High School.

This research could also be expanded to the other area high schools in order to determine other students’ feelings about being transitioned to high school. There could also be other factors besides the ones mentioned in this research project that affect how other area high school students feel about attending high school. Perhaps these other
schools have other transition strategies that could be used in order to benefit all the high school students in Wood County.

More time should have been allowed for this research. Time was the key aspect that determined the scale of this research project. Only having about three months to obtain permission from the Human Subjects Committee, obtain site permission, come up with a method of research, and analyze the data caused this study to be on a smaller scale than this researcher would have liked.

Since this research was completed approximately seven months after the freshmen had started attending Parkersburg High School, perhaps measuring the feelings of the freshmen closer to when they started school could be an area to look at. Measuring the students’ feelings every month could show how long it takes for the students to adjust to high school.

Another area for future research would be to see if the orientation improved since the one held in 2008. Another survey could be given to see what the students thought about following orientations at Parkersburg High School. Questions could be asked to see if it was helpful or not, see if any changes were made between the years, and what could be done to improve the orientation.

The next area that could be examined would be to implement some of the other strategies that the students suggested in order to ease the transition between middle school and high school. One of the strategies was to join a club and/or sports team. Looking at the number of freshmen that joined clubs and/or sports could be determined. Their adjustment to high school could be compared to those that did not join club/sports to see if participating in extracurricular activities actually does help students transition
better into high school. Also, just making the incoming freshmen aware of all the clubs and sports that they could join. This researcher is sure that many of the freshmen were not aware of all of the extracurricular activities available at Parkersburg High School. A list should be made of all the activities and clubs open to freshmen. Another suggestion was to have a dance before school started. Again adjustment time could be measured for those that attended the dance to those that did not attend. The final strategy suggested was to have students that attend Parkersburg High School come to speak to the upcoming freshmen. The students could be asked if they thought having the upperclassmen come to speak to them was helpful or not.

Finally, maturity was the main reason why the students in this survey felt that they were ready to attend Parkersburg High School. However, it would have been nice to know what maturity meant to these students. Perhaps a method of measuring maturity could be found that could help determine which students are ready for high school and which are not. And for those that are not ready, maybe another method besides sending them to the high school with the students that are ready can be determined.

*Implications of Research*

This researcher hopes that by completing this research that the Wood County Schools system as well as the students in the Wood County School District benefit in that areas of anxiety were identified and that methods to ease or even cease the anxiety can be developed and implemented. This researcher hopes that changes suggested by the students are taken into account for the next orientation in order to make it more productive and helpful for the students. Finally, it is this researcher’s hope that the methods that the students suggested in order to ease the transition from middle school to
high school be considered and possibly implemented in the near future. The students are already are under great stress and anxiety and anything that can be done to ease this stress and anxiety needs to be done in order to make the transition from middle school to high school as smooth as possible.
APPENDIX

TITLE OF APPENDIX
REFERENCES


Figure Caption

*Figure 1.* Information sheet given to the research participants, parents/guardians, and any other individual who requested a form so that they could be informed about what this study entailed.
Dear Research Participant,

As part of my Master’s Degree in Education at Marietta College, I am doing a thesis regarding how Parkersburg High School (PHS) ninth graders feel about being ninth graders in a high school setting rather than in a junior high school setting. I will also examine transition methods that could be implemented in order to ease the transition from middle school to high school. As a current ninth grader attending PHS, you are invited to participate in this study. This study will consist of data being collected through a researcher-generated survey consisting of questions regarding feelings about being a ninth grader at PHS, orientation attendance, interactions with individuals who have attended or are currently attending PHS, and suggestions for transition methods. While there is a plethora of research regarding how teachers, administrators, and parents feel that grades should be divided among schools, there is little to no research regarding how students feel. This research aims to help fill the gap in literature regarding this subject. Both the Marietta College Human Subjects Committee and Parkersburg High School have approved this study. Participation is solely voluntary. All research data will be stored in secure files. Your responses will be kept anonymous and shared with my academic advisor and if needed, the Wood County Board of Education without the mentioning of names.

I am looking forward to completing this study for Marietta College and if needed, sharing the information with Wood County Board of Education. Please obtain permission from your parent/guardian and return the signed informed consent form to me. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (E-mail works the best).

Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Katherine Vickers
vickersk@marietta.edu
(304) 580-1258
Figure Caption

*Figure 2.* Informed Consent Form given to the parent/guardian of the research participant and to the research participant in order to participate in the study.
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

GRADE SHIFT: HOW PARKERSBURG HIGH SCHOOL NINTH GRADERS FEEL ABOUT BEING TRANSITIONED FROM JUNIOR HIGHSCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL

Katherine R. Vickers  
Marietta College Master’s of  
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This study aims to find out how Parkersburg High School (PHS) ninth grade students feel about being transitioned from being a ninth grader at the junior high school level to the high school level.

Although there is a lot of research pertaining to how parents, teachers, and administrators feel about how grades should be divided among schools, there is little to no research about how students feel the grades should be divided. This research has been approved by the Marietta College Human Subjects Committee.

This research will be conducted using a survey generated by the researcher. The participant will answer questions regarding how they felt when they first discovered they would be a ninth grader in high school rather than junior high school, orientation attendance, their interactions with people who are currently attending or have attended PHS, suggestions for easing the transition from junior high school to high school, and if their feelings have changed since the first day they attended PHS. This survey will take no longer than ten minutes to complete by pencil and paper. Filling out the informed consent form and turning in the completed survey indicates consent for participation in this study. Participation is voluntary. Since names are not required on the survey, anonymity is assured. The consent form will be kept with the completed survey only in the event that a participant would wish to withdraw from the study. The participant needs to indicate their desire to withdraw so that their survey does not affect the validity of the results. The researcher will read all of the surveys, and themes will be developed based on participant responses. No individual responses to the survey questions will be shared with any other parties. All research data will be stored in secure files (computer and actual) and will only be used for the purpose of this study. If needed, Wood County Board of Education will receive a debriefing, and the finished thesis will be given to the Board for their review.

This study will benefit Wood County Schools System as well as the students in many ways: 1) identify areas of anxiety that Wood County needs to address, 2) see if the orientation is really effective, and
3) suggestions for other methods to ease the transition from middle school to high school that could be implemented in the future.

Please sign and date on the appropriate lines at the bottom of this form. Cut at the line and turn in the bottom of this page. Keep the rest of this packet for your reference during this study. Any further questions can be sent by e-mail to vickersk@marietta.edu.

I have read the attached information and understand that by signing this form I am giving consent to participate in this study. I understand that a participant can withdraw at anytime by informing the researcher and that anonymity will be maintained.

--------------------------------------------------
Research Participant Print Name
Research Participant Signature
Date

--------------------------------------------------
Parent/Guardian Print Name
Parent/Guardian Signature
Date
Figure Caption

*Figure 3.* Survey given to the research participants regarding their feelings about being ninth graders in a high school setting rather than a junior high school setting, orientation attendance, interactions with people that have attended or are currently attending PHS, and suggestions for easing the transition between middle school and high school.
SURVEY

GRADE SHIFT: HOW PARKERSBURG HIGH SCHOOL NINTH GRADERS FEEL ABOUT BEING TRANSITIONED FROM JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL

1. Date Completed the Survey:

2. Gender: Male Female

3. What junior high school did you attend?

4. How did you feel when you first found out that you would be a ninth grader attending Parkersburg High School (PHS) rather than being a ninth grader at a junior high school?

5. Did you attend the ninth grade orientation held in August? If yes, go to question 6A and then 6B. If no, go to question 7A and then 7B.

6. A) Why did you attend the orientation?

B) Was the orientation helpful? If so, how was it helpful? If not, what could be done to make it more helpful?

7. A) Why didn’t you attend the orientation?

B) Do you feel like you missed out since you did not attend the orientation? Explain your answer.
8. What are some other strategies that you think would help ease the transition from middle school to high school?

9. What have you heard about PHS from people that have attended or currently attend PHS? Please indicate your relationship with the person if able known.

10. Do you feel like you were ready to attend PHS as a ninth grader? Explain your answer.

11. Have your feelings changed since the first day that you attended PHS? If so, how have they changed?

12. Please put any other thoughts that you might have relating to this study in the space below