POSITIONING NINTH GRADE STUDENTS TO SUCCEED: EFFECTIVE PRACTICES, PROCESSES, AND ACTIVITIES OF A SCHOOL-BASED TEAM CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The intent of this mixed-methods case study was to examine the practices, processes, and associated factors of a school-based team mandated by the district for the purpose of supporting freshmen students during their first year of high school. The study utilized the Theory of Change theoretical framework with the logic model as a reference for aligning and connecting the activities and outcomes investigated. The purposeful sampling included eight teachers, one counselor, and one assistant principal of curriculum and instruction. The data collected consisted of archived data, a survey, a focus group, interviews, and an observation.

According to the research, school-based teams along with quality teacher collaboration have been shown to positively impact the ninth-grade transition (Knacckendoffel, 2017; Liebech-Lien, 2021; Rosenfield et al., 2018). Based on the findings of this study, the school-based team implemented numerous practices and activities to help ensure the academic, social, and emotional success of ninth-grade students. It was found that the members of the team perceived the freshman cluster – school-based team as effective due to the atmosphere of trust and mutual respect among the freshman cluster team members, the genuine concern for the students, and the continuous implementation of interventions and support. Although this study did not find statistically significant increases or decreases in the attendance and credits earned before and after the implementation of the school-based team, the study did find practical increases in attendance and credits earned for individual students. This study also supports current literature in providing various support and interventions to ninth-grade students during their transition to high school to increase their chances of a smooth transition and academic success.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my father, James F. Reed. He was always one of my biggest fans and supporters. My world is not the same without him in it. He encouraged me to pursue a doctorate degree after earning my master's degree. I know he is looking down from heaven with great pride. I did it!

Acknowledgments

I am eternally grateful to God for His abiding love for me. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Jeremiah 29:1.

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Many thanks to all the participants that took part in the study. I appreciate the knowledge and experiences shared with me for this research.

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Chapter I. Introduction

Obtaining a high school diploma is acknowledged globally as a significant life event that signifies the successful transition to adulthood. Not earning a high school diploma is associated with a number of consequences that negatively impact the individual and society (Dupéré et al., 2018). "For students who fail to graduate from high school, a long history of research has demonstrated that on average, in comparison to graduates, these students experience higher rates of unemployment, incarceration, and lower overall lifetime earnings and life expectancy" (Bowers et al., 2013, p. 77). This is a national crisis that also has psychological and social ramifications as well as economic implications. The "graduation effect" means students who graduate from high school are more likely to gain skilled employment, achieve food security, and live longer healthier lives (Alliance For Excellent Education, n.d.). It is believed that every student has the potential to affect a community. Having more students graduate from high school and be equipped to be successful in college or a career entails a cooperative effort of educators, parents, business executives, policymakers, community members, and nonprofit leaders.

Background of the Problem

The transition from elementary/junior high/middle school to high school can be challenging for many students. Clark and Hunley (2007) stated, "Regardless of where they live, incoming freshmen face the same problems nationwide, such as anxiety about entering a new school, social pressure, and increased academic pressure and responsibility" (p. 41). Some freshmen are shocked by some of the academic requirements and the shifts in priorities high school requires. McCallumore and Sparapani (2010) reported that many studies have focused on the ninth-grade year because it is believed that the ninth-grade year is the make-or-break year for completing high school. Most high schools across the country noted truancy, discipline referrals,

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and failures as the highest among ninth-grade students (Habeeb, 2013). Along with truancy, the decline in grades, and discipline issues, the results also included disengagement and feelings of alienation or social rejection. Although some at-risk students drop out of high school before obtaining their high school diploma, others that are equally at-risk do not drop out and graduate from high school (Lessard et al., 2014).

It is estimated that the dropout rate is between 40-60% for students identified as at-risk in their first year of high school. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2020) reported continuous graduation rate gaps and disparity among the various ethnicities – 92% Asian/Pacific Islander, 89% White, 81% Hispanic, 79% Black, and 74% American Indian/Alaska Native. A study conducted by Sanders et al. (2016) found that adversity and resources that African American and low socio-economic youth experienced affected their ability to stay on track with their education. For some at-risk students, staying in school and obtaining their high school diploma is too difficult for their situation (Knesting, 2008). Williams and Bryan's (2013) research consistently showed that children living in urban areas are more likely to face economic, social, and other obstacles that place them at risk for school failure, dropping out, and other difficulties than suburban and rural peers. Other studies have also shown that another indication of failure to graduate or to graduate timely is retention at least once during the elementary years. According to Knesting (2008), students who find themselves offtrack with their credits in their second year of high school usually become disengaged are less likely to graduate with their peers and drop out of school.

The graduation rate is an essential indicator of students' performance in American schools (Seastrom & Chapman, 2006). According to the NCES (2020) about 25% of high school students fail to graduate from high school on time. Before 2010, the NCES (2020) calculated and

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reported three measurements annually that focused on dropout and retention rates. The measurements included the population-based rate, the school-based rate, and a hybrid of the two. The population-based rate measured the percentage of people in a specified population who have completed high school – the population-based data came from the Current Population Survey. The school-based rate measured the percentage of students who graduated in a specific year – the data came from public schools the NCES collected annually, also known as the Common Core of Data (CCD). The hybrid measurement rate was the ratio of high school graduates to the population age of 17 in a specific year – the data came from the CCD school-based data, the Private School Survey, and the Current Population Survey (Seastrom & Chapman, 2006). According to the NCES (2022), over 1.2 million students drop out of high school every year. This means approximately 7,000 students a day or a student every 26 seconds (Alliance For Excellent Education, n.d.).

The three graduation measurements published annually by the NCES that focused on dropout and retention measures had several limitations and inconsistencies (Seastrom & Chapman, 2006). A push for a more accurate measurement regarding an on-time high school graduation rate, accountability, and a standardized calculation of graduation rates among the states led to the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) measurement and the now averaged freshman graduation rate (AFGR) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

The AFGR is the percentage of first-time ninth-grade students attending a public high school and graduating with a regular diploma within four years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). According to the NCES (2020), the AFGRs are more comparable across the states than the previous graduation rates. The first AFGR measurement was calculated at 79%

for the 2010-11 school year. The AFGR was reported at 82% for the 2012-13 school year and 85% for the 2017-18 school year.

At one point, Ohio had a dropout rate of 4.2%, which was above the national average of 3.4% (10tv.com, 2012). In July 2021, the National Center for Education Statistics (2022) prepared a 5-year average dropout rate report for the school years 2015-2019. Ohio and the U.S. national 5-year average were reported the same at 5.5% (Digest of Education Statistics, 2021).

In Ohio, 28% of the students reside in urban areas which consist of various races and ethnic backgrounds. Eight out of ten are identified as economically disadvantaged (Ohio Education by the Numbers, 2023). African American/minority/at-risk students in urban districts are graduating about eight percentage points behind the national average (America's Promise, High School Graduation Facts: Ending the Dropout Crisis, n.d.).

Reducing ninth-grade failures appears to be the first step to reforming high school and improving graduation rates. According to the research, improving practices in the ninth grade specifically can increase academic achievement and boost the number of students on track for graduation when they start their second year of high school. In 2010 the "GradNation" Campaign officially launched with a national goal of a 90% high school graduation rate by 2020 (America's Promise, What We Do, n.d.). A 90% high school graduation rate for the United States could mean 14,260 new jobs, \$7.8 billion in home sales, \$535 million in auto sales, \$504 million in federal tax revenue, \$3.1 billion in earnings, \$159 million in state and local tax revenue, \$2.5 billion in spending, \$16.1 billion savings on healthcare, and \$5.7 billion in GDP – Gross Domestic Products (Alliance For Excellent Education, n.d.).

Politicians on the federal and state levels along with educators have been progressively concentrating on the ninth grade as the year that determines whether a student will continue or

drop out of school. Despite the gradual AFGR increases, we now have a more diverse student body with nuanced learning needs and increased student exposure to poverty and social stressors. Just like the changing student population, many jobs are rapidly changing and require different skill sets (Li, 2022).

Because continual learning and the awareness of Ohio's workforce needs are crucial in today's economy, the strengthening of Ohio's school counselor system was made a priority (Kasich, 2017,). This led to career advising policies and improved access to school counseling services. Two million dollars was allocated to support this effort (Graduation Plans and Policies for Identifying Students At Risk of Not Graduating, n.d.).

The career advising policies of 2015 are now reinforced by the at-risk legislation of 2020. Ohio Revised Code (ORC) Section 3313.617 – Adoption of policy for students at risk of not qualifying for high school diploma (Appendix A) was an initiative sponsored by former Governor Kasich's administration (Graduation Plans and Policies for Identifying Students At Risk of Not Graduating, n.d.). It became a joint effort between the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation, the Ohio Board of Regents, and the Ohio Department of Education. The initiative's purpose was that all students are afforded an equitable opportunity to earn a high school diploma. Effective September 17, 2014, the state law required each school district board of education to adopt a policy no later than June 30, 2020, regarding at-risk students not qualifying for a high school diploma (Section 3313.6020: Policy on career advising, n.d.). This law appeared to ensure that students are inspired by their high schools to identify paths to becoming productive citizens within our society.

The policy focused more on creating relevance and purpose in the classroom, identifying career interests that would allow the students to make informed decisions, maintain engagement,

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focus, motivation, and promote post-secondary options, access, and completion. Because the required components of the policy are a list of suggestions, schools are free to implement based on the needs of the school or district. This design may cause some districts or schools difficulties implementing the policy due to diverse interpretations of the policy.

Along with the at-risk legislation of 2020, it is uncertain how the pandemic will affect future graduation rates in the long run. Based on the last AFGR reported before the pandemic we were close to the 90% graduation rate goal with an 88% graduation rate for the 2018-2019 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Some states have released their data for the class of 2021 and found their graduation rate decreased (Barnum et al., 2022). The complete national graduation rate data will likely not be available until the end of 2023.

To truly improve graduation rates and reform high school, it must start with the changing of ninth grade. Many public high schools have implemented various teaming models as a systematic and comprehensive strategy to address ninth-grade academic failure and disengagement (Emmett & McGee, 2012). Teachers collaborating seems to be a progressively important component for solving problems in the education field (Dimmitt, 2003). Although individual productivity is important, collaboration is essential in solving complex issues. Numerous public high schools have reported the implementation of school-based teams, such as freshman academies, small learning communities, or teaming models, as a systematic and comprehensive strategy to address ninth-grade academic failure and disengagement (Emmett & McGee, 2012).

A typical freshman academy isolates first-year students from the rest of the student population. The teachers within the academy meet regularly as a team to integrate curricula and plan various activities, such as projects and state test preparation (Clark & Hunley, 2007). According to Habeeb (2013), freshman academies have become common, but it is not the best way to support students as they transition to high school. He noted the teaming model as a more effective way to support high school freshmen. The teaming model is flexible and maximizes resources. Students are not isolated in one part of the building, and it is easier to identify students who need extra support. A typical teaming model is a collaborative problem-solving group of educators within a school to support teachers in meeting the diverse needs of students (Habeeb, 2013). School problem-solving group names vary based on the team's purpose, problem-solving process, and outcomes sought by the team. The names include teacher assistance teams, student assistance teams, intervention assistance teams, child study teams, peer intervention teams, pre-referral intervention teams, school consultation committees, instructional consultation teams, instructional support teams, and mainstream assistance teams (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bahr, Fernstrom, et al., 1990, as cited in Bahr et al., 1999).

To increase academic success for at-risk ninth-grade students at an urban public school located in Northwest Ohio, it created a school-based team called the freshman cluster. The freshman cluster consists of a team of eight teachers – two math, two English, two social studies, and two science along with a counselor and the assistant principal of curriculum and instruction. The freshman cluster team meets daily to review student data and discuss various supports and interventions to support the needs of at-risk freshman students.

Rationale & Significance of the Study

The Ohio Department of Education (n.d.) claims teacher-based teams are a primary factor regarding academic achievement for freshman students. There are now many freshmen transition programs and models throughout the nation (Bahr et al., 1999; Clark & Clark, 2006; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Habeeb, 2013; Knacckendoffel, 2017; Liebech-Lien, 2021; Moore McBride et

al., 2016; Rosenfield et al., 2018; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). Most transition programs and models share some common aspects such as teacher teaming and collaborative planning; students divided into house teams who have their own dedicated team of teachers and administrators; and a segregated geographical area of the school for freshmen only. Many schools operate under the premise that this type of support will provide students with academic support, personal development, and social support, which will facilitate their transition to high school and successful graduation at the end of four years. According to Edmonson (2012), along with teacher teaming and collaborative planning, Edmonson (2012) also mentioned team effectiveness as a crucial aspect in attaining progress and achieving goals.

The rationale and significance of this study are on both a micro and macro level. On the micro level, this study will provide qualitative and quantitative evidence on the effectiveness of a school-based team – the practices, processes, and activities implemented to support freshmen students. On the macro level, this study will contribute to the literature that already exists concerning students transitioning to high school and will fill a gap concerning school-based teams and effective practices, processes, and activities that pertain to the success of ninth-grade students. It will also provide practitioners, school-based teams and district-wide leaders with information pertaining to practices and policies that may be applicable to similar school settings.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this case study was to examine the practices, processes, and associated factors of a school-based team mandated by the district and its impact on freshman attendance and credits earned. No thorough assessment of the effectiveness and impact of the school-based team on ninth-grade students transitioning to high school has been conducted at this school nor within the district.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized the Theory of Change theoretical framework, with the logic model as a reference for aligning and connecting the activities and outcomes investigated. "Theory of Change" is a method that describes how an intervention is expected to lead to a specific change, drawing on a causal analysis based on the evidence (Theory of Change, 2022). The theoretical framework is derived from program theory and program evaluation. The Theory of Change approach emerged in the mid-1990s. During a Roundtable Steering Committee meeting on evaluation, Weiss and Connell (1995) and a few other notable methodologists noted the challenges of evaluating complex community initiatives and created the Theory of Change approach. This approach goes beyond program evaluation because it identifies conditions that help teams produce their desired outcomes. This means it also includes recommending the right partnerships, specific technical assistance, and tools and processes that help people operate more collaboratively and be more results-focused (Principal, 2020).

There are five components associated with this theory. The components include inputs – what is used; activities – what is done; outputs – what is produced; outcomes – what is achieved; and impact – the why. Utilizing this framework and applying the logic model lens shifts the focus to the right practices and activities that connect to the desired outcomes. Since we now have a more diverse student body with multifaceted learning needs and increased student exposure to poverty and social stressors, this framework allowed examination of the team's methods and strategies to ensure each student is provided with the necessary support to succeed. Figure 1 below is a pictorial representation of the Theory of Change Elements.

Figure 1

Theory of Change



Note. The elements associated with the Theory of Change Framework. From

https://learningforsustainability.net/theory-of-change/. In the public domain.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- 1. What is the impact of the freshman cluster on student attendance and credits earned?
- 2. What were the freshman cluster's practices, processes, and activities that impacted student attendance and credits earned?
- 3. Why were the practices, processes, and activities effective according to the freshmen cluster's perspective?

Definition of Terms

The following terminology provides interpretive clarity for this study.

- At-risk a student's context that could lead to educational failure and dropping out of high school (Lemon & Watson, 2011).
- High school dropout –a student who leaves school to alleviate the frustration created by the inability to manage the educational demands (Ungureanu, 2013).

- Graduation rate the average freshman graduation rate is the percentage of first-time ninth-grade students attending a public high school and graduating with a regular diploma within four years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).
- Graduate on time the completion of high school within four years after entering as a freshman (Bornsheuer et al., 2011).
- Teacher-Based-Teams a teaming model that utilizes data and maximizes resources to support at-risk students (Habeeb, 2013).
- Teaming Model a nurturing and supportive environment for educators to meet regularly and discuss ways to meet their students' needs (Habeeb, 2013).

Subjectivity & Researcher Positionality

As a Black American woman, I understand that my personal experiences and opinions should be clear and forthright regarding my view of the education system and a functioning team. I grew up in a blue-collar, middle-class family. Most of the students were Black at the elementary school I attended. In the junior high and high schools, I attended, most of the students were White. I am a first-generation college graduate. I lived with my parents, worked, and cared for my baby while attending college.

After 13 years in the finance and accounting field, I decided to step out on faith, quit my corporate job, and pursue a career in education. In both professions, I have been afforded the opportunity to lead and work on many teams. I am a member of several organizations and associations where I have also had the opportunity to work on and lead various teams. These experiences have shaped my view of a functioning team which could affect how I collect and interpret the data during my research study.

My research interests are directly associated with my personal career experiences in the education field. For ten years, I taught at predominantly Black schools, with low attendance rates, high dropout rates, low standardized test scores, high disciplinary infractions, low family involvement and participation, and a high percentage of students with individualized education plans (IEPs). This is my second year as the assistant principal for the virtual academy. Prior to this position, I was the assistant principal of curriculum and instruction for seven years at a Title 1 comprehensive high school within the district. The school is classified as Title 1 because of the percentage of students on free or reduced lunch and breakfast. As the assistant principal of curriculum and instruction, I oversaw and participated in the freshman cluster. Ninth grade has become my passion. I believe if you want to reform high school, begin by changing ninth grade. This study was conducted at a comprehensive high school within the district where I was not the assistant principal of curriculum and instruction.

Chapter II. Literature Review

High-school dropouts have been an issue for over 125 years (Knesting, & Waldron, 2006). Education has always been the foundation of a country's economic and social growth (Babino et al., 2018). According to Babino et al. (2018), obtaining a high school diploma is acknowledged globally as a significant life event that impacts the successful transition to adulthood. Preparing students for a successful future does not end with a high school diploma; however, it is a critical first step. High school graduation can be a gateway to higher education, civic engagement, and economic self-sufficiency (Zaff et al., 2016).

To increase the graduation rate and maximize the number of students graduating on time, schools should consider effective interventions and activities that might provide the necessary support to students identified at risk during their transition to high school. It is documented extensively that positive academic results are attributed to the collaboration of parents, community, and school (Niehaus & Adelson, 2014). The challenge for the school-based team is to ensure that the transition leaves the freshmen students feeling prepared, optimistic, cared for, and confident.

The intent of this case study was to examine the practices, processes, and associated factors of a school-based team mandated by the district and its impact on freshman attendance and credits earned. The following research questions guided the study:

- 1. What is the impact of the freshman cluster on student attendance and credits earned?
- 2. What were the freshman cluster's practices, processes, and activities that impacted student attendance and credits earned?
- 3. Why were the practices, processes, and activities effective according to the freshmen cluster's perspective?

An objective, iterative search process was employed to identify every accessible research study. Databases - Education Source, ERIC, and Google Scholar were assessed and searched to find relevant peer-reviewed primary research articles. The search terms included: "at-risk high school students," "ninth-grade transition programs," "school-based teams," "teaming," "resilience among high school students," "urban high schools," "high school dropouts," "dropout prevention," "interventions," "Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System," "freshman academies," and "collaboration of ninth-grade teachers." This research pursuit was not limited to just keyword searches. It also included the "related links" section on the websites and a review of what other writers had to say about the search keywords. The search results provided various peer-reviewed journals and articles that offered substantive materials for the research. This allowed a clear background and understanding of the study's focus. Four areas emerged – academic transitions, ninth-grade year, causes of high school dropout, and school-based teams. An understanding of academic transitions and the causes of high school dropouts was collected as this information was used heavily in connection with research question two. An understanding of school-based teams was collected as this information was used heavily in connection with research question three.

Theoretical Considerations

The Theory of Change theoretical framework is an outcomes-based approach that provided a model for aligning evidence with outcomes (Theory of Change, 2022). The framework not only provided a way to observe alignment, but it also provided a way to observe efficiency, and most importantly, impact on student achievement. It considered many vital elements that assisted program understanding and learning for sustainability. According to Vogel (2012), the Theory of Change is both a process and a product. It is best developed during the planning stage of an initiative, but it can be developed retrospectively by examining program documents, talking to participants, and analyzing data (Theory of Change, 2022). For this study, it was created in retrospect.

Academic Transitions

Transitioning to high school requires students to move from the known to the unknown. Every year, many students transition from elementary, junior high or middle school to high school (Mizelle, 2005). The transition to high school can be overwhelming and disruptive for many students. Some freshmen are unprepared to handle some of the academic requirements, social challenges, and the shifts in priorities high school requires (Blount, 2012). As the students transition to high school, many will not only experience developmental changes, but most will also experience a change in school. Research indicated that attaining a smooth transition may be difficult for some students, especially those identified as at-risk (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Benner et al., 2017; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2004). Some ninth-grade students have a problem adjusting to the physical environment because of the size of the school. According to Neild et al. (2001), large high schools offer a less personal environment that may cause some students to become socially withdrawn and academically disengaged. Schiller (1999) described the academic transition as "a process during which institutional and social factors influence which students' educational careers are positively or negatively affected by this movement between organizations" (pp. 216-217). This process validates Hertzog and Morgan's (1999) theory that transition is not an event but a duration of time that affects students' behaviors and attitudes across two organizations. In that respect, the transition – success or failure from junior high or middle school to high school- can be a critical time in students' academic and social lives.

Cooper and Markoe-Hayes (2005) conducted a mixed-method study to examine the attitudes and experiences of students during their transitional year in high school. One hundred and fifty ninth-grade students and their families in a residential summer program participated in the study. The program was a joint venture between the UCLA Ease Project, The Dream Foundation, and the educators at Valley High school in Sacramento, CA, to identify potential students for college (Cooper & Markoe-Hayes, 2005). The qualitative data consisted of focus group interviews and the quantitative data consisted of surveys. While 80% of the students in the study were confident, enthusiastic, and optimistic, they also reported the immense physical layout of the school, and fears of getting lost created fear and trepidation.

Smith et al. (2006) conducted a quantitative study to examine the similarities and differences in the perceptions between students and parents before the transition to high school. This is a study of a large public high school in the Midwest where three middle schools feed into the high school with over 3000 students. The study consisted of 40 students at the end of their eighth-grade year and their parents from one of the middle schools. The students completed a survey with 35 items prompting them to think about their transition to high school. The survey measured the students' feelings about the academics, social, and organizational aspects of high school pertaining to the transition. The data analysis found that the students reported being more concerned about getting lost and finding their way around the high school.

Johnstone (2001) conducted a study to understand the journey of uncertainty from a student's perspective. The qualitative research investigated 13 rural Australian students from four primary schools in regional New South Wales experiences on the transition to high school. The researcher conducted interviews, reviewed student journals, and examined questionnaires. The data was collected during the five weeks before the end of the primary school year and during the first three terms of year seven in high school. The data analysis discovered that the students had many anxieties associated with the physical environment of high school.

Benner et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study that investigated how personal characteristics – gender, nativity, parent education level along with changes in support from family, friends, and school influenced changes in socioemotional adjustment/depressive symptoms and academic outcomes during the transition from middle school to high school. The researchers utilized short-term longitudinal data and surveys with a total possible sample size of 252 8th grade participants from two urban middle schools. The data were analyzed using the analysis of variance (ANOVAs) - SPSS, the path analyses – a structural equation modeling framework, the Mplus Version 7.4, and the full information maximum likelihood (FIML) method to address missing data. The study found no significant change across high school transitions in students' depressive symptoms, school engagement, and attendance. However, the researchers learned that students' course grades declined significantly across the transition to high school, along with increased feelings of loneliness. The researchers noted that support in various contexts is vital for the well-being of diverse students during the transition to high school.

Clayton (2017) conducted a mixed-methods study to understand the relationships between types and sources of social support, contextual risks, and participants' achievement outcomes. The sample consisted of 176 participants. The participants were recruited utilizing a systematic stratified random sampling procedure. The participants completed a 220-item selfreport questionnaire. The questionnaire also consisted of one closed-ended and six open-ended questions. The relationships between the dependent and independent variables were examined using bivariate statistical procedures and multiple linear regressions. Deductive logic also guided the analysis. The linear multiple regression analysis determined that three social support variables predicted GPA. The three supporting variables were family togetherness, school behavior expectations, and peer group acceptance. Also, during the analysis, seven themes emerged: (1) tangible support, (2) standards, (3) social support, (4) guidance support, (5) communication support, (6) behavioral support, and (7) emotional support. Certain teacher behaviors also emerged as a theme. Those behaviors included quality instruction and teachers helping with schoolwork.

Desiree' et al. (2015) conducted a study to provide information about students' perceptions of support systems to educators, researchers, and parents. It also sought to provide educators and parents with methods to collaborate and alleviate the inequities in achievement for students of color. Twenty students participated in the qualitative study. Based on the grounded theory, the study utilized the constant comparative analytic approach for data analysis. Codes that reflected common themes were assigned. According to the findings, the participants consistently mentioned how relationships and support from people, such as their family, friends, and the Upward Bound program staff, enriched their schooling experiences.

Turner (2007) conducted a quantitative study examining how psychologically prepared inner-city youth are before and during the transition to high school. One hundred and forty-seven eighth-grade students from one inner-city middle school participated in the study. Students were administered various tests that measured the following variables: psychological preparation to transition, career development skills, parental assistance, academic preparation, and social/environmental barriers. The study investigated relationships among variables. The data analysis found that support from parents, teachers, and peers was consistently correlated with educational attitudes and behaviors. This means there is evidence that psychological preparation to transition into high school is related to academic performance, career development skills efficacy, support from significant others, and social/environmental barriers.

Ninth Grade Year

Researchers agree that the first year of high school is crucial for adjustment, achievement, and the road to graduation (Crofton & Neild, 2018; Pileggi & Strouf, 2019; Willis et al., 2019). The transition to high school involves students moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar. This means a different environment, expectations, structure, and culture (Roybal et al., 2014). It also means greater independence, expanded learning opportunities, personal growth, and a more comprehensive range of academic and social choices (Crofton & Neild, 2018). Regardless of where the students live, students generally face the same problems nationwide (Clark & Hunley, 2007). According to McCallumre and Sparapani (2010), "Statistics generated from freshmen year are concerning. Ninth graders have the lowest grade point average, the most missed classes, most failing grades, and more misbehavior referrals than any other grade" (p. 60). Many school districts have identified a strong start for ninth-grade students as a vital element of their school reform plan to increase high school graduation rates (Crofton & Neild, 2018).

Bornsheuer et al. (2011) conducted a quantitative study investigating the relationship between ninth-grade retention and on-time graduation for a rural Texas High School in a rural area. The study only focused on the students who did not earn a minimum of 5.5 credits during their freshman year and were retained in ninth grade. The researchers reviewed student transcripts and the graduation data. The study consisted of 1,202 transcripts along with graduation data. A chi-square analysis determined the relationship between the variables with an alpha set at .05. The chi-squared analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between ninth-grade retention and on-time graduation. According to the findings, students not retained in the ninth grade are more likely to graduate.

Styron and Peasant (2010) conducted a study to assess the statistical differences between ninth-grade academies and traditional high schools. The study utilized archival data from firsttime ninth-grade students' Algebra 1 SATP test and the Biology I SATP test. The data was analyzed using the independent t-test with a statistically significant difference at the .05 alpha level. The sample consisted of 50 participants who attended traditional high schools and 50 enrolled in ninth-grade academies. All participants were randomly selected. The researchers found a significant difference in students' scores in ninth-grade academies and traditional high schools. Ninth-grade students enrolled in academies generally scored higher.

Kayler and Sherman (2009) conducted a mixed-methods study to evaluate an intervention designed to strengthen studying behaviors for at-risk ninth-grade students. Ninety students participated in the study. The researchers utilized questionnaires and observations. The questionnaires were analyzed using the paired-sample t-test and the deductive and iterative process was used to analyze the data from the observations. Several themes emerged from the observation data. The researchers found that the small group counseling intervention strengthened the ninth-grade students studying behaviors. They also found increasing and improving school counselor relationships with students, parents, and other stakeholders beneficial.

Brake (2020) conducted a qualitative study to examine critical classroom practices during the first ten weeks of school for helping ninth-grade students build trust, make significant school connections, and get on track right from the beginning of the school year. The researchers selected 33 participants using a theoretical sampling strategy. A total of 73 interviews were conducted for the year-long study. Several themes about whether the students found the teachers trustworthy emerged from the interviews – teachers who showed flexibility, understanding, and patience; teachers who led classroom activities that developed norms and expectations; the frequent use of classroom conferencing to build relationships; made learning enjoyable; and the teacher was seen as a resource beyond the classroom. The study found that the priority teachers that implemented specific classroom practices at the beginning of the school year were critical in establishing teacher-student trust. The researcher also noted that building trusting teacher-student relationships in ninth grade significantly affects students' social and emotional development.

Parker and Wilkins (2018) conducted a qualitative case study to understand how three underachieving ninth-grade Black males applied self-determination skills to cultivate their engagement in school. The researchers utilized the convenience and purposive sampling process to select the participants. Several one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. After using a deductive and iterative process, three self-determination skills emerged from the discussion – self-awareness, self-regulation, and expressing preferences. The study found that self-directed use of multiple self-determination skills may cultivate school engagement.

Causes of High School Dropout

The dropout problem has been the focus of researchers, business and community leaders, and educators for decades (Camper et al., 2019). The decision to drop out of high school results from an accumulation of disengagement that may have begun as early as elementary school (Brown, 2010; Fall & Roberts, 2012). Factors that may contribute to the decision to drop out of high school include 1) a lack of experienced teachers, 2) a lack of advanced courses, 3) feeling isolated from the school, 4) not having a bond with the school, and 5) feeling that the teachers

and administrators did not care about the students (Awang-Hashim et al., 2015; Bowers et al., 2013; Brooks, 2015; Brown, 2010; Hopson & Lee, 2011; McDermott et al., 2018). Not all risk factors have the same effect if a student decides to drop out of high school (McDermott et al., 2018). Students with low self-efficacy and low motivation have a greater chance of high school dropout.

A significant body of work has investigated reasons that influence students to drop out. The research extends from the early 20th-century predecessors until now. The influences are classified into three aspects – push, pull, or fall out (Doll et al., 2013; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; McDermott et al., 2017; Wangmo & Tshewant, 2021).

A student is considered pushed out of school when the conditions inside the school impact a student's decision to drop out of high school. Examples of push-out conditions include discipline, grades, and attendance (Doll et al., 2013). Research indicates that students fall behind between 9th and 10th grade because some freshmen are unprepared to handle the academic requirements, developmental issues, social challenges, and shifts in priorities high school requires (Blount, 2012). Transitioning from 9th to 10th grade is crucial in ensuring students graduate high school, specifically in low SES schools (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). According to Pharris-Ciurej et al. (2012), ninth-grade students have the highest rates of truancy, discipline referrals, and failing grades. A West Coast school district found that of the 3000 students enrolled in 9th grade, only half were still enrolled by 12th grade (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012).

High-stakes tests make it difficult for some students to meet the requirements to advance to 10th grade. Students who do not pass the high-stake tests are often labeled as having low academic achievement (McDermott et al., 2018; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). According to Snyder and Dillow (2015), factors that affect academic achievement also include lack of student

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engagement, the focus on behavior management over academic achievement, quality of instruction, poor pedagogy, low expectations, and inadequately prepared teachers. Students who begin high school with deficient academic readiness skills are at risk for continued academic difficulties (Hughes & Chen, 2011). This means low academic performance, such as poor grades, off-track with credits, and dropping out of high school.

Low academic performance is a predictor of social and behavioral issues in school (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hughes & Chen, 2011). Connected to the at-risk attributes are students in low SES groups who are African American or Latino (Brooks, 2015; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Hughes & Chen, 2011; Snyder & Dillow, 2015). According to Evans-Brown (2015), people who have a high level of self-efficacy consider more career opportunities and equip themselves academically for those professions. The low achievement correlates to many referrals to special education (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). This means an increase in dropout rates, leading to academic achievement gaps between affluent and underprivileged students in urban communities. Students who are placed in special education are often kept from the mainstream general education classes, which limits their ability to acquire the necessary educational requirements to earn a high school diploma (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). The special education label and the exclusion can also push students to decide to drop out of high school (Snyder & Dillow, 2015).

A student is considered pulled out of school when external factors impact their decision to drop out of high school (Doll et al., 2013). According to Doll et al. (2013), external factors include family, employment, or other financial reasons. The family factor is the predictor that is most mentioned in research studies, although many factors of high school dropout are attributed to the school system (Fall & Roberts, 2012; McDermott et al., 2018). Many studies have found that students from higher SES families have a lower dropout rate than those from low SES families (McDermott et al., 2018). According to McDermott et al. (2018), in addition to SES as a contributing factor to high school dropout, students with parents with education beyond high school are less likely to drop out of high school.

Males are not the only individuals affected by high school dropouts. As male dropouts who are incarnated or unemployed increase, the number of unmarried females in communities with high dropout rates has increased (McMurrey, 2014). In fact, pregnancy is the reason 30% of girls drop out of high school (Marshall, 2011). Only 38% of teens with a baby will earn a high school diploma before they turn 18 (Marshall, 2011). Approximately 89% of the female students who decide to drop out and do not become a teen mom will eventually earn a high school diploma, compared to 51% of teen mothers (Marshall, 2011).

A student is labeled a fall out when the student becomes disengaged, uninterested, or disconnected within the school environment (Doll et al., 2013). Parental involvement is critical in students transitioning to high school (Mac Iver et al., 2018). Along with parent involvement, teachers also have an influence on a student's decision to drop out of high school (Collie et al., 2016; Fallis & Opotow, 2003; Hughes & Chen, 2011). Students with a positive and supportive relationship with their teachers are more engaged, have academic achievement, and are likely to have peer acceptance (Hughes & Chen, 2011).

The literature suggests that students drop out of school for various reasons before earning their high school diploma. Besides the predictive risk factors for students dropping out of school – credits earned and attendance, the studies also listed no role model, lack of motivation due to the perceived irrelevance of school, and the environment as reasons for becoming disengaged (Blount, 2012; Camper et al., 2019; Franklin et al., 2007; McDermott et al., 2018). According to

the scholarship, best practices include staff exhibiting a caring and committed approach while creating a learning environment that is not threatening.

Fallis and Opotow (2003) conducted a study on how prevalent class cutting happens and how students perceive class cutting. Class cutting is common across public high schools of all types. The issue with class cutting, students lose continuity in the curriculum, class assignments become challenging, and quizzes along with tests become difficult to pass. The study was conducted at two large schools. Both large urban schools had similar demographics, which included high dropout rates, more than half the students on free/reduced lunches, and a high percentage of students identified as minorities, specifically Black and Latino. Some students volunteered to participate in the study and some students were recruited by their teachers. Sample 1 consisted of 3000 participants and Sample 2 consisted of 1000 participants. Interviews were conducted. Many students reported cutting class because classes were boring, teachers labeled them as losers, and the school allowed it. According to the data, class cutting is problematic, leading to moral exclusion and structural violence. It was found that class cutting has increased substantially, which leads to school disengagement – affecting attendance and student achievement. The students noted boredom as the number one reason. However, boredom meant many things which included: holding the entire class back for one student, busy work while the teacher is out, teachers no longer caring due to misbehaved students, and assignments not challenging.

Camper et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative case study on why gifted students dropped out of school before earning their high school diploma. The sample participants consisted of two females and two males – a Black, a Filipino, a Caucasian, and a Haitian/Cuban/Syrian. Four themes emerged in the findings. The themes included family discord, school not engaging, no

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role model, and minimum family participation. The researchers found that regardless of a student's documented or perceived academic abilities, educators, policymakers, and community leaders should do more to recognize and respond to the needs of all at-risk students.

Knesting and Waldron (2006) conducted a study to understand why some students decided to stay in school versus why some students decided to leave school. Seventeen students were identified by their teachers as being at-risk and were recommended for participation. Interviews were conducted with the 17 students and several faculty members. Observations were conducted in 22 classes, in between classes, and before and after school. To ensure the reliability of the data, the researchers followed a 4-step process. This helped with validating the data and avoiding possible biases and misinterpretation of the data.

The study revealed that the participants did acknowledge the importance of a high school diploma as a way to a better life, financial independence, the ability to continue one's education, and avoiding the consequences of dropping out of school. The findings also revealed that persistence did not keep students on track with their education. The students still needed support and meaningful connections with trusted adults to succeed and stay on track for graduation.

Lessard et al. (2014) studied what sets resilient students apart from students who drop out and what educators can do to promote education resilience. Data was gathered from 808 participants. All the participants were French-Canadian Caucasians, ages ranging from 19-22. All resided in Quebec, Canada. They were contacted twice a year for this longitudinal study. The interviews focused on school life. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that concentrated on primary and secondary school experiences and their relationships with other students, teachers, principals, family members, and friends.
The study found that self-esteem, classroom participation, and the enjoyment of school were defining factors for students with resilience. The study revealed that resilient and dropout students reported that having a positive relationship with a teacher was essential. The two also noted the importance of teachers providing structure and support. Students with resilience knew they would succeed. Although many had learning disabilities, they reported working long and hard to learn the concepts and complete the work. Students that exhibited resilience had coping skills and managed their anxiety. The data also showed that resilient students were able to establish positive relationships.

McDermott et al. (2018) conducted a mixed-methods study to understand why students drop out of high school. The survey was completed by 1,942 participants. The Chi-square tests with a p<.007 revealed differences between those included in the sample and those who were not. The phone interviews consisted of 1,047 participants. More than half the respondents indicated that the environment and school engagement were the reasons for dropping out. It was found that students leave school for various reasons. In this study, students reported various turning point reasons such as mobility, family, peers, school engagement and environment, health, and crime.

Blount's (2012) literature review also explored why students dropped out of school. The keywords utilized for this report included transition to ninth grade, dropout prevention, strategies for dropout prevention, risk factors associated with dropouts, dropout characteristics, and dropout prevention strategies for school counselors. Six factors were reported that attributed to students dropping out of high school – the failure of core academic courses, failure to be promoted to the next grade level, excessive absenteeism, socioeconomic status, high mobility, and disengagement. The literature review also investigated the role of the school counselor and

possible intervention strategies and programs to decrease students from dropping out of school – empirically supported interventions and support from fellow teachers.

Knesting (2008) conducted a study to gain a greater understanding of at-risk students' experiences in a comprehensive high school and how these experiences influenced their decision to persist in school. The qualitative study participants included 17 students at risk of dropping out of school, the principal, vice-principal, two deans, four guidance counselors, and the past and present social worker. The data from the interviews revealed the importance of supportive teachers. A supportive teacher accepted students' worldviews whether or not they believed the views to be valid. Supportive teachers believed all students could succeed. Supportive teachers had high expectations, challenged all students academically, provided a safe place, and respected all students. The study also revealed four critical considerations for supporting students during the transition to high school – listening to students, a caring school community, the school's role in dropout prevention, and the students' role in dropout prevention were listed as critical considerations.

Franklin et al. (2007) conducted a quasi-experimental study to evaluate the effectiveness of an alternative school in preventing students from dropping out of high school. The study utilized a pretest-post-test group design. The experimental group consisted of 46 students who attended the alternative school and the comparison group consisted of 39 students who attended a public school. ANOVA tests were conducted using a .001 p-value. A correlation was found between credits earned and attendance. It was found that focusing on academics to engage students versus focusing on discipline effectively decreased the dropout rate.

Williams et al. (2017) conducted a study that examined the methods that aided 24 students to sustain high academic achievement despite their low socioeconomic. The participants

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represented diverse racial/ethnic groups. The groups included White American, African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Middle Eastern. This study conducted phone interviews. The phone interviews consisted of eight open-ended questions and probing questions to obtain as much specific information and clarification as possible.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Four major themes emerged from the data. The four major themes included 1) peer social capital, 2) teachers who care, 3) family and community assets, and 4) multiple streams of motivation. According to the findings, the students could draw on both intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation to succeed despite their socioeconomic status. This allowed the students to mitigate the influence of risks and the vulnerabilities experienced.

School-Based Teams

According to Edmonson (2012), effective school-based teams can create more innovative solutions for organizations. This means building a highly effective team is essential to teacher efficacy, teacher learning, and ultimately student learning (Dimmitt, 2003). A school-based team investigation may provide educators, administrators, and teachers with multiple and inter-linking factors regarding the importance of a school-based team to support at-risk students transitioning to high school and current effective processes that create a structured support system for at-risk students transitioning to high school. Teaming is a verb (The Importance of Teaming, 2012). Edmondson (2012) defined teaming as a dynamic activity, not a bounded, static entity. Teamwork/collaboration can create a sense of commitment and trust within an organization. It can also motivate employees to communicate, work together, and support one another.

According to Habeeb (2013), freshman academies have become common, but it is not the best way to support students as they transition to high school. He noted the teaming model. The

teaming model is flexible and maximizes resources. Students are not isolated in one part of the building, and it is easier to identify students needing extra support.

DeSocio et al. (2007) conducted a study to determine if receiving services from a schoolbased health center and having a teacher as a mentor could positively impact students with high absenteeism and school disengagement that leads to dropping out of school. The control group consisted of 37 students and the intervention group consisted of 29 students. The researchers hypothesized that students assigned the interventions would increase school engagement, remain in school, improve attendance, and improve grades versus those not receiving the interventions. The quantitative study utilized the ANOVA and Pearson Chi-Square with an alpha set at less than or equal to .05. The study found that students receiving interventions were significantly more likely to remain in school and complete the school year than the students not receiving interventions.

Kayler and Sherman (2009) conducted a mixed-method study to evaluate an intervention designed to strengthen studying behaviors for at-risk ninth-grade students. The study consisted of 90 participants who completed questionnaires and participated in observations. The data from the questionnaires were analyzed using a t-test. Overall, the analysis variance tests revealed no significant mean differences, but when the participants' data were analyzed individually, such as GPAs, it was found to increase significantly. Improved communication with students was also evident.

McKee and Caldarella (2016) conducted a quantitative study to determine the efficacy of middle school academic risk indicators that identify students who may struggle in high school. The data from 416 students was accessed through the school's databases. The results of the study found that four middle school indicators were strong predictors for students who may struggle in

high school. The four indicators included GPA, D grades, attendance, and ACT math scores. The strong predictors for dropping out of high school included: high school GPA, attendance, and course failures. The study also noted the following strategies for increasing student attendance and academic achievement: 1) recognizing and reinforcing good attendance, 2) responding consistently to the first absence, 3) having teachers and administrators collect and analyze student attendance to identify struggling students, and 4) arranging frequent meetings of teachers, counselors, and administrators to analyze data to develop targeted interventions.

Bahr et al. (1999) conducted a study to confirm practical school-based team activities to address the diverse needs of educators and students. A total of 121 elementary school-based teams from Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin participated in the quantitative study. The study incorporated several statistical tests. The responses to the type of problems addressed by the type of teams were analyzed using the Chi-square statistical test. Team effectiveness, follow-up, and quality indices were analyzed using the one-tail ANOVA. The mixed model ANOVA analyzed the responses regarding team personnel, problem identifiers, and views on professional issues.

The study found no significance with an alpha level of .01 concerning the responses that pertained to the problems addressed by each team. Illinois and Wisconsin participants reported a significantly higher level of team effectiveness than Michigan, with a p-value of .005. Participants selected administrators as the most effective communicators on the team. Special education teachers were behind the administrators as effective communicators on the team due to their knowledge regarding interventions. Quality indices that included teacher judgments and assignment of responsibilities were comparable across all three states. Illinois also reported utilizing permanent products, standardized tests, and curriculum-based assessments to determine intervention effectiveness. The results were identical for all three states regarding views on professional issues with a probability of .01 or less. Participants rated collaboration as essential. Collaboration was significantly higher than using a team as an effective model. It was viewed as more essential in the consultation/intervention process. Collaboration was also significantly higher than the level of support for inclusion.

Suntisukwongchote (2006) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine collaborative working models, specifically to test Fishbough's collaboration models. The study consisted of 31 surveys completed by science teachers only and interviews with 16 department heads and five science teachers. The study found that most science teachers rarely advise other teachers. This includes how to teach a science topic, help new teachers, learn a new technique, or ask experienced teachers for help. The results revealed that most science teachers rarely utilized the Consulting and Coaching Teaming models to collaborate via email and the Internet. Science teachers, in general, rarely assisted other science teachers in developing their craft. Some attributed it to not having enough time. Comments from the interview found that few teachers used email and the Internet for collaboration. The results also showed that computer proficiency and technical accessibility of networks are not the only reasons for not collaborating. Building collaborative electronic communities, having confidence in their relationship with other members, and having confidence in themselves – their roles as equally important is just as important. The study also noted that some teachers lacked confidence in their ability and knowledge, and many did not feel comfortable collaborating.

Somers and Piliawsky (2004) conducted a study that evaluated a drop-out prevention program. The study examined student motivation and explored role models' impact on preventing students from dropping out of high school. The drop-out prevention program provided academic tutoring and supplemental enrichment for ninth-grade students. The tutoring program took place after school four days a week. Participants in the tutoring program also attended monthly enrichment sessions that were designed to increase academics, self-esteem, self-efficacy, motivation, and career options.

An open-ended questionnaire was disseminated to 96 ninth-grade students to measure factors on educational attitudes and behaviors, academic outcomes, motivation, and role models. Surveys were also disseminated to the students participating in the tutoring program. The tutor program data was collected from the surveys and the open circle discussions. The study's afterschool tutor program evaluation portion consisted of an experimental and a control group. The researchers measured grade point averages and used the Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to determine academic performance. The researchers also measured student educational attitudes, behaviors, academic outcomes, motivators, and role models. The Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was used to detect changes in the five educational attitudes and behaviors subscales. The Pearson correlation analyses measured educational attitudes and behaviors subscales and grade point averages. All statistical tests utilized the alpha of .05 to explore the relationships among the variables.

The findings reported that grade point averages for students participating in the tutoring program did not significantly improve. The findings did show that the retention rate was considerably better for the ninth-grade students who participated in the tutoring program versus the rest of the ninth-grade students in that school and the ninth-grade student population for the entire district. The study also confirmed the idea that high school transition can be problematic. Intentions to finish high school revealed a strong correlation with actual behaviors related to executing the intentions at the beginning and end of ninth grade. The behaviors included several, such as attendance and studying. The Pearson correlation analyses revealed significant

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correlations between students' grade point averages and two of the five educational attitudes and behaviors subscales. The grade point averages were higher when educational Intentions and Identification of Personal Value of Education were greater. According to the study, the dropout rate for tenth-grade students who participated in the program was lower than the students who did not participate in the program.

Robbins and Searby (2013) conducted a study to examine parental involvement strategies implemented by interdisciplinary teaching teams from three different middle schools. A multiple-case study approach was utilized. Three middle school interdisciplinary teams were purposefully selected to participate in the study. Members of the interdisciplinary teams along with the parents agreed to participate in the case study. The case study consisted of one-on-one interviews, written questionnaires, and focus groups. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement was chosen. The case selection process began with a complete list of all certified schools within the state. The list was narrowed down based on geographic classification, such as urban, suburban, and rural schools with established and highly successful teams. Lastly, principals were tasked with picking one interdisciplinary team of teachers that closely matched the research protocols. The qualitative case study provided a thorough exploratory picture of the central phenomenon. The data collected included multiple semistructured team interviews, multiple team meeting observations, ongoing team document review, multiple teacher email prompts, a parent questionnaire, and multiple parent focus groups. The data was collected over nine weeks.

Data was consistently analyzed throughout the course of the research study. The recordings were transcribed immediately after the team interviews, team meeting observations, and the parent focus groups. The transcribed text was analyzed and reviewed twice for accuracy.

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The data was coded, categorically aggregated, and assigned labels. The team documents, teacher email responses, and parent questionnaire data were coded similarly. Themes were categorized as rural, urban, and suburban. The themes were then analyzed for similarities and differences. To increase validity, the researcher triangulated the data, which provided descriptive comparative results. Four common themes emerged for the three effective middle school teams. The crosscase themes included:

- Theme 1 Believe that parental involvement is essential to student success.
- Theme 2 Are open and approachable to parents.
- Theme 3 Serve as a resource to the parents of adolescents.
- Theme 4 Approach problem-solving opportunities with parents as a team instead of as individuals.

According to Robbins and Searby (2013), their study confirmed that parental involvement contributing factors described by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model are essential. Giving the findings, middle school teams have the potential to impact students, parents, and families in positive ways. Various data collections provided a thorough understanding of the strategies for parental involvement. The following were noted: 1) meet regularly as a team, 2) develop team approaches to problem-solve issues, 3) create team procedures, policies, and expectations – communicate to students and parents, and 4) conduct all conferences as a team.

Summary

Dropping out of high school has serious consequences. Researchers agree that the first year of high school is crucial for adjustment, achievement, and the road to graduation (Crofton & Neild, 2018; Pileggi & Strouf, 2019; Willis et al., 2019). Students who are identified as at risk for dropping out of high school before graduation may require tier two and tier three

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interventions to ensure they are prepared for the rapidly changing workplace and can earn their diploma. Literature supports different strategies and interventions as necessary for many students to stay on track with their academics. As graduation requirements change, schools and districts must ensure equity for a student population with diverse needs. Many researchers investigated and found teaming as effective and essential to teacher efficacy, teacher learning, and ultimately student learning (Dimmitt, 2003).

Chapter III. Methodology

Helping ninth-grade students make a successful transition into high school is not a new concern for educators. Many students struggle in their first year of high school because of the difficult transition from elementary/middle/junior high to high school. Schiller (1999) described the academic transition as "a process during which institutional and social factors influence which students' educational careers are positively or negatively affected by this movement between organizations" (pp. 216-217). For years, statistics related to student attendance, behavioral referrals, student academic achievement, connectivity to school, and graduation rates have been of concern for ninth-grade students (Benner, 2011; Emmett & McGee, 2012; Habeeb, 2013; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Collaboration seems to be an essential component for solving problems in the education field (Edmondson, 2012). Edmondson (2012) noted that teaming/collaboration can create a sense of commitment and trust within an organization. It can also motivate employees to communicate, work together, and support one another, which can lead to more innovative solutions that support at-risk students. According to the literature, building highly effective school-based teams is essential to teacher efficacy, teacher learning, and ultimately student learning (Dimmitt, 2003). This case study aimed to determine a school-based team's impact on freshman students and to better understand the team's strengths and weaknesses for further development and administration support.

An urban school district in northwest Ohio has experienced low graduation rates and is ranked within the bottom 50% of all 897 school districts in Ohio since 2011 (Public School Review, n.d.). As part of the district's improvement plan, a mandate for all six comprehensive high schools to form a school-based team called the freshman cluster starting the 2014-2015 school year was issued. The freshman cluster was established to align with the pedagogical and theoretical ideals of a small learning community, where the needs of the students were met to create an environment of trust, support, and encouragement to be carried into the remaining high school years.

The teachers that are members of the freshman cluster receive an extra plan period in their schedule. This means they only teach five periods versus six periods. According to the memorandum of understanding between the local Board of Education and the local Federation of Teachers, the following is the purpose of the extra plan period:

- 1. Meet with parents and students.
- Develop and implement thematic units and activities utilizing Common Core and Revised State Standards.
- 3. Design and prepare for the implementation of parental involvement activities.
- 4. Analyze data to determine student goals and objectives based upon collective and individual student criteria.
- 5. Conduct Teacher-Based-Teams.
- Determine and implement adult common cluster expectations as well as student expectations, consequences, and incentives based on Positive Behavior Supports (Info retrieved from the district's BoardDocs).

No thorough assessment of the effectiveness of a school's freshman cluster and its impact on student absences and credits earned during freshman year had been completed prior to this study. A mixed-methods formative evaluation was selected and approved for this study. The assessment was conducted for one of the comprehensive high schools within the district through a survey, individual interviews, a focus-group interview, and an observation of a meeting. The Theory of Change served as the theoretical framework for this study and a logic model was utilized as a reference for aligning and connecting the activities and outcomes. This theoretical framework is derived from program theory and program evaluation (Theory of Change, 2022). The Theory of Change approach emerged in the mid-1990s. During a Roundtable Steering Committee meeting on evaluation, Weiss and Connell (1995) and a few other notable methodologists noted the challenges of evaluating complex community initiatives and created the Theory of Change approach. This approach goes beyond program evaluation because it identifies conditions that help teams produce their desired outcomes. This means it also included recommending the right partnerships, specific technical assistance, and tools and processes that help people operate more collaboratively and be more results-focused (Principal, 2020).

The comprehensive high school selected for this study enrollment consisted of 675 students – 355 females and 320 males. The student population was comprised of 469 (69.5%) Black, Non-Hispanic; 24 (3.6%) Hispanic; 55 (8.1%) Multiracial; 120 (17.8%) White, Non-Hispanic; and 7 (1%) Asian or Pacific Islander. There were 674 (99.9%) students identified as economically disadvantaged (Public School Review, n.d.). The researcher investigated the school-based team members' current practices, processes, perceptions of the team's effectiveness, and the ninth-grade students' attendance and credits earned after their first year of high school.

This chapter describes key components that include the research design, the participants and sampling technique, the ethical considerations, the instrumentation and data sources, data collection procedures, the data analysis, the assumptions, and the trustworthiness. The Research Design section describes and justifies the methods used in this study. The Participation section discusses the participants surveyed and interviewed. The Ethical Considerations section discusses the philosophy that guided the research design and practices for this study. The Instrumentation and Data Source section thoroughly addresses the survey administered to the team members. It also discusses the focus group and individual interview questions in detail. The Data Collection Procedure section examines and justifies the methodology. The data collection and methods used to aggregate, code, and analyze the qualitative and quantitative data are found in the Data Analysis section. The Assumption section discusses how the survey, the individual, and focus group interviews depended on participant honesty and experience with the schoolbased team. The last section of this chapter, Trustworthiness, covers the steps taken to ensure the findings were valid and the conclusions were trustworthy. All sections of this chapter focused on answering the following research questions established for this study.

Research Questions

- 1. What is the impact of the freshman cluster on student attendance and credits earned?
- 2. What were the freshman cluster's practices, processes, and activities that impacted student attendance and credits earned?
- 3. Why were the practices, processes, and activities effective according to the freshmen cluster's perspective?

Research Design

This study utilized a case study mixed methodology approach. An evaluation of this kind required qualitative data collection (i.e., a survey, field notes from an observation along with interviews of team members) and quantitative data collection (i.e., archival data of students' attendance records and credits earned). Qualitative data is suitable when the research aims to explain a phenomenon based on the perception of a person's experience (Stake, 2010), while quantitative data is appropriate when the researcher seeks to understand connections between variables (Creswell, 2003).

For the attendance records regarding days absent and the credits earned quantitative data, the ex post facto causal-comparative design was utilized. Ex post facto is Latin and means "after the fact" (Ellis-O'Quinn, 2011). Since both the initial data and after-treatment data have already occurred, this is a study in retrospect. In other words, students have already completed their freshman year. The causal-comparative design was used because this study sought to find the relationship between the independent and dependent variables and to determine the extent the independent variable (IV) affected the dependent variable (DV). The IV included the practices, processes, and activities. The DV included the students' attendance histories and credits earned, which were compared using a t-test statistical analysis to determine if there was a significant difference between the two groups of data before and after the implementation of the schoolbased team.

For the qualitative data, the phenomenology design along with a thematic analysis inductive approach were used to focus on the views and experiences of the participants by examining whether the school-based team's practices (IV), processes (IV), and activities (IV) impacted student attendance (DV) and credits earned (DV). The observation protocol and interview guides were researcher developed to avoid asking questions that may lead the participants to answer in a particular manner. The recordings from the focused group interview, the individual interviews, and the team meeting observation were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. The transcripts were analyzed using a color-coding process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Figure 2 shows an inductive color-coding process where the codes are derived from the data.

Figure 2

Inductive Coding Analysis



Note. Transcript data is first reviewed, then grouped into themes, and then the codes are developed from the data and themes. From https://delvetool.com/blog/deductiveinductive. In the public domain.

The data was categorically aggregated and assigned labels to identify patterns in the participants' thinking and beliefs regarding the school-based team programmatic structure. Major and minor themes were identified. The themes were developed directly from what was stated or described. Each theme was based on a quote or group of quotes directly from the transcripts. The themes were then analyzed for similarities and differences. For the survey, a frequency distribution table was utilized to summarize the data and create charts in Excel.

Research question (RQ) 1 was investigated, using the students' attendance histories and/or records and credits earned archived data. Research question (RQ) 2 was investigated using a focus group, field observation, and one-on-one interviews. Research question (RQ) 3 was investigated using a survey.

By using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, it increased the reliability and validity of the case study evaluation. This approach also expanded the evidence base, allowed for triangulation of the data, strengthened the study's conclusion, and was the most appropriate choice.

Participants & Sampling Technique

The convenience sampling approach was utilized for this study. Convenience sampling is a nonprobability or nonrandom sampling technique where members of the target population meet criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate in the study (Ilker et al., 2016).

The Freshman Cluster consisted of eight teachers – two English teachers, two math teachers, two social studies teachers, two science teachers, one counselor, and the assistant principal of curriculum and instruction. Teachers who chose to participate on the Freshmen Cluster team are required to teach two or more sections of ninth-grade courses. Three of the teachers are females and five are males. Seven teachers are White, and one teacher is Black. The counselor is a White male and the assistant principal of curriculum and instruction is a Black female.

A survey was disseminated among the ten school-based team members. The purposes of the survey were to gather demographic data and assess the school-based team perspectives on the team's practices, processes, and activities along with the impact on student outcomes.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical rights of all participants were considered. First, permission from the principal was obtained to perform a study (Appendix B). Then approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained to conduct the study (Appendix C). All participants received an informational letter (Appendix D) that included a brief statement regarding the nature of the project, the objectives, and the benefits, along with a consent form (Appendix E) that provided a

complete description of the nature of participation. Upon receipt of the completed consent forms, an observation of a freshman cluster meeting along with the focused-group and individual interviews were scheduled. The interview participants chose pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. If names were shared during the interviews, pseudonyms were used. Also, upon receipt of the completed consent forms, a link to the survey was emailed to the participants. No names or other specific identifying information from the survey was collected. Survey responses and interview transcripts were securely stored. Additionally, to ensure the anonymity of the study's participants, the school's name was not disclosed.

Instrumentation & Data Sources

This case study utilized four instruments that provided a thorough exploratory picture of the central phenomenon. The instruments included 1) a data table for the archived student attendance records and credits earned, 2) interview guides, 3) an observation protocol, and 4) a survey.

A data reporter from the district's Student Information & Reporting Office provided the credits earned data and the attendance records data for each student in a spreadsheet for the school years 2012-13 through 2021-22. The district installed a new student information system in 2012. The archived data prior to the implementation of the freshman cluster for credits earned only goes back for two years – 2012-13 and 2013-14. Archived data after the implementation of the freshman cluster for credits earned goes from 2014-15 to 2021-22. A summary of the credits earned data from 2012-13 to 2021-22 can be viewed in Chapter 4 Table 7 Credits Earned 2012-2023 School Years. The attendance records data prior to the implementation of the freshman cluster only goes back two years – 2012-13 and 2013-14. Due to House Bill 410 (HB 410) requirements, attendance was no longer tracked by the day. It is now tracked by the minute. The

attendance records data after the implementation of the freshman cluster and before HB 410 are from 2014-15 to 2016-17. A summary of the attendance records data from 2012-13 to 2016-17 can be viewed in Chapter 4 Table 4 Attendance Records 2012-2017 School Years.

The interview guides (Appendix F) were researcher-created to ensure the data desired was collected. Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that interviews are most appropriate for exploratory research. The design of the semi-structured open-ended questions for the interviews was based on Rubin and Rubin's (2012) responsive interviewing method. The responsive interviewing method is grounded on the conversational partnership formed between the researcher and the participant(s). The semi-structured open-ended questions were based on the theoretical framework for this study. The Theory of Change consists of five components 1) inputs, 2) activities, 3) outputs, 4) outcomes, and 5) impact. The table below is the theoretical basis for the focus group and the one-on-one interview guides.

Table 1

Survey	Question	Research	Theory of
		Question	Change Component
1.	What does it mean to be a part of the freshman cluster?	3	Input
2.	What do you think affects a student's connectivity to school?	2	Output
3.	What interventions are in place to help reduce chronic absenteeism?	2	Activities
4.	What supports are in place to help enhance academic achievement?	2	Activities
5.	What interventions are in place to prevent student failure in core curriculum subjects?	2	Activities

Theoretical Basis for Design of Interview Guides

A TEAMING MODEL EVALUATION

6.	How does the school-based team ensure it is holding members accountable for high quality and regular progress monitoring?	3	Outputs
7.	How is discipline handled?	3	Outcomes
8.	What are the strengths and weaknesses of the freshman cluster?	3	Outcomes
9.	How do you receive/provide support in being an effective teacher/administrator and member of the freshman cluster?	3	Input

Note: The archived data pertaining to student attendance and credits earned pertains to RQ 1 and is based on the theoretical framework component Impact.

The researcher was able to gather a comprehensive and in-depth picture of the participants' experiences. This allowed the researcher to understand and create meaning through the experiences of the participant's words and stories.

The observation protocol (Appendix G) was also researcher-developed to obtain the desired detailed notes on the freshman cluster meeting's content and structure as well as the relationships and team dynamics. The field observation allowed the researcher to observe the participants in the context of their work environment and gain insight into how the team operates. According to Guba and Lincoln (1981), observations allow researchers to focus on the phenomenon and discern the information using their eyes and ears, which can be lost by merely interviewing participants and asking questions. Based on the theoretical input and output components, the anecdotal notes focused on three areas: how the team members interacted during the meetings, how the dialogue consistently focused on the examination of evidence/data related to student performance, and the attainment of the school-based team's goals. The table below is the research basis for the observation protocol pertaining to RQs 2 and 3.

Table 2

Observation		Research	Research
Eleme	ents	Question	Basis
1.	Freshman Cluster Content and Structure	2	DeSocio, VanCura, Nelson, Hewitt, Kitzman, and Cole (2007) Robbins and Searby (2013)
2.	Freshman Cluster Relationships and Dynamics	3	Somers and Piliawsky (2004) Kaylor and Sherman (2009) Edmondson (2012) Habeeb (2013) Robbins and Searby (2013)

Research Basis for Design of Observation Protocol

With permission from the London Leadership Academy of the National Health Service (National Health Service, n.d.), the questionnaire with a Cronbach value of α =.77 was utilized for this study (Shahid & Din, 2021). The 56-question questionnaire is a survey for team effectiveness with eight dimensions. The eight dimensions included (1) purpose and goals, (2) passion and commitment, (3) skills and learning, (4) roles, (5) team processes, (6) team relationships, (7) intergroup relations, and (8) problem-solving.

After reviewing the 56-question questionnaire, visualizing the perceived burden, and based on RQ 3 for this study, the questionnaire was adapted from 56 questions to 13 questions. A Google form was created to disseminate the survey to the participants. The first part of the survey consisted of seven demographic data questions (i.e., years as an educator, education level, the number of years on the school-based team, area of licensure, gender, race, and age range). The second part of the survey consisted of nine questions based on the eight domains from the 56-question questionnaire and four questions based on RQ 3 and the theoretical framework. The Likert scale (i.e., strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree) was utilized for all the questions. Question 1 addressed the team's purpose and goals. Question 2 addressed the members of the team roles. Questions 3 and 4 addressed the team processes. Question 5 addressed team relationships. Question 6 addressed the team's intergroup relationships. Question 7 addressed the team's problem-solving skills. Question 8 addressed the team's passion and commitment. Question 9 addressed the team's skills and learning. Questions 10-13 addressed the team's processes, practices, activities, and outcomes. The survey can be viewed in Appendix H.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher met with the Freshman Cluster as a group face-to-face. The participants were advised the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and informed of their rights to participate and not to participate in the study. The team members were allowed to complete and return the consent form. A link to the survey was later emailed to the participants who completed the consent form. The survey was created utilizing Google Forms. The Google form is webbased and was shared with the participants by sending a link of the survey. The data gathered was stored in a spreadsheet.

The school's credits earned data and attendance records data were requested using the district's online data request form located on the district's intranet. The data reporter for the district provided the information in a spreadsheet format via email for both attendance records and credits earned.

The observation, focus group, and one-on-one interviews were scheduled on mutually agreed days and times. The focus-group interview took place via Zoom, a prearranged setting with teacher participants. The participants were again advised of the study and their rights to participate and their rights not to participate. Their identities and privacy were protected. Each participant chose a pseudonym when referencing him or her and was assured that no identifying information would be published. The participants were asked for their approval to record the session and for the researcher to take notes. The session lasted from 45 minutes to 60 minutes.

The one-on-one interviews with the counselor and the assistant principal of curriculum also took place via Zoom, in separate prearranged settings. Again, the participants were advised of the study and their rights to participate and their rights not to participate. Their identities and privacy were protected. Each participant chose a pseudonym when referencing him or her and was assured no identifying information would be published. The participants were asked for their approval to record the session and for the researcher to take notes. The sessions lasted from 45 to 60 minutes.

The observation took place face-to-face during a freshman cluster meeting. The participants were again advised of the study and their rights to participate and their rights not to participate. Their identities and privacy were protected by each participant choosing a pseudonym that was used when referencing him or her and was assured no identifying information would be published. The participants were asked for their approval to use the audio recorder and for the researcher to take notes. The session lasted about 40 minutes.

Data Analysis

A triangulated approach was utilized to analyze the data to ensure a comprehensive investigation. Park (2021) noted, "triangulation is a way to increase the credibility of the interpretation of qualitative data by comparing two more different sources, methods, researchers, or theories" (p. 2). Data triangulation does not overlap, validate, confirm accuracy or nonexistence. Instead, it seeks to collect information from several sources. Figure 3 is an example of a triangulation of different data sources.

Figure 3

Triangulation of Data Sources



Note. A triangulation of different data sources brought together to enrich the analysis of findings. From <u>https://ars.els-cdn.com/content/image/3-s2.0-B9780128169421000083-f08-04-9780128169421.jpg</u>. In the public domain.

For RQ 1 (What is the impact of the freshman cluster on student attendance and credits earned?), separate independent two-tailed, unequal variance t-tests were conducted for the number of days absent and the number of credits earned. The alpha level for the tests was set at .05 to determine if there was a significant difference between the two groups of data – before and after the implementation of the school-based team. The quantitative student performance data derived from the data pertaining to the attendance records – days absent, and the credits earned during the first year of high school were analyzed for statistical significance using the t-test.

For RQ 2 (What were the freshman cluster's practices, processes, and activities that impacted student attendance and credits earned?) the practices, processes, and activities derived from the interviews and field observation were analyzed using a color-coding process via a webbased software application which provided descriptive comparative results. For RQ 3 (Why were the practices, processes, and activities effective according to the freshmen cluster's perspective?) the responses from the survey were tallied using Excel. The results derived from the survey allowed the researcher to triangulate the findings with the themes and results derived from the field observation and interviews.

Assumptions

The researcher assumed the participants answered the questions honestly and candidly during the focus group and individual interviews. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, which provided comfort and confidentiality for the participants. The researcher assumed the participants completed the survey honestly and candidly. The survey was administered electronically to preserve confidentiality to maximize truthfulness. The researcher also assumed the academic performance data was updated with fidelity by all district members responsible for data input.

Trustworthiness

Surveys, interviews, and observations are standard assessment instruments used in research. Along with the assessment instruments, the researcher must have respect and trust for the participants to be studied. This means the researcher needs to be confident in the truthfulness of the responses.

The researcher explained to the participants the purpose of their participation in the study. Participants were advised that no identifying information would be published. Their identities and privacy will be protected. To ensure confidentiality, each participant chose a pseudonym for the researcher to reference during the focus group. Participants were advised that they could abort participation at any given time when they felt uncomfortable. Any information received prior to a participant aborting participation will still be part of the study. During the interviews and observation, permission to record, use an audio recorder, and a notepad to collect data was asked of the participants. Member checking was utilized to improve the interview sessions' reliability and validity. Member checking is the process of verifying the researcher's interpretation of the meaning regarding the participants' experiences with the participants who experienced it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), member checking can be performed during the interview process, at the conclusion of the study, or both. It helps improve the credibility, accuracy, and transferability of the study. This means the researcher summarized the information and then questioned the participants to determine accuracy. This allowed the participants to agree or disagree on whether the synopses reflect their feelings, views, and experiences. This also provided the researcher an opportunity to understand and assess the participants' experience, reinforce credibility and validity, limit personal biases within the study, and give the participants an opportunity to correct errors and challenge information perceived as wrong interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Chapter IV. Results

The results from the data gathered for this case study concentrated on three key areas that allowed triangulation of the data. First, responses from a survey and artifacts related to the freshman cluster, such as archival and documented data were collected. Second, transcripts with detailed and varying responses were generated from the focus group, comprised of freshmen cluster teachers, and the one-on-one interviews with the assistant principal of curriculum and instruction and the guidance counselor. Third, observation and audio data were collected from a freshman cluster meeting that provided detailed field notes.

The intent of this case study was to examine the impact the freshman cluster – a schoolbased team at a northwest Ohio high school had on students during their first year of high school. Experts agree that the first year of high school is crucial for adjustment, achievement, and the road to graduation (Crofton & Neild, 2018; Pileggi & Strouf, 2019; Willis et al., 2019). Based on the theoretical framework – Theory of Change – and the logic model, the researcher sought to align and connect the processes, activities, and outcomes of the freshman cluster by examining the team's shared perceptions (what the team members must think), behaviors (what the team members must do), and attitudes (what the team members must feel, value, or believe) while they pursue the objectives and goals of the team (Rosenfield et al., 2018).

The first section of this chapter discussed the demographics of the individuals invited to participate in the study. Then the instruments utilized in this study are presented along with how the validity and reliability were established. Next, an analysis of the data collected is presented to provide answers to each research question. Finally, a summary highlights the gaps in the data, and topics that may be beneficial to investigate further.

Characteristics of the Sample

All individuals serving on the Freshman Cluster received an invitation to participate in the case study. All ten individuals signed the consent form to participate in the study. Nine out of the ten participants completed the survey which resulted in a 90% response rate. Table 1 is a summary of the participants' demographics from the survey.

Table 1

Category	Description	Number	Percentage %
Number of years as an educator	Number of years as an educator1-5 years		22
	6-10 years	2	22
	11-15 years	1	11
	21-25 years	3	33
	25 or more years	1	11
Highest education obtained	Undergraduate degree	2	22
	Undergraduate degree plus graduate-level		
	credits	2	22
	Master's degree	1	11
	Master's degree plus graduate-level credits	4	44
Number of years on the freshman cluster, the school-	Less than one year	4	44
Uascu icalli	Three years	1	11
	More than five years	4	44

Summary of Participants' Demographics

Category	Description	Number	Percentage %
Gender	Female	4	44
	Male	5	56
Race	Black, Non-Hispanic	2	22
	White, Non-Hispanic	7	78
Age range	21-29	1	11
	30-39	2	22
	40-49	4	44
	50-59	2	22

Note. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 2 is a summary of the participants' demographics in relation to the entire school's demographics for the categories pertaining to gender, race, and highest degree earned. Although the percentage differences between the genders are modest, the race and the highest degree earned categories for the freshman cluster are not a representation of the entire school. The gender slight difference may be attributed to the fact that participation on the freshman cluster is voluntary. Participant 3 stated, "We signed up to participate, it's based on seniority, it's a passion, it's something that we wanted to be a part of."

Table 2

		Freshman (Cluster	Schoo	1
Category	Description	Number	%	Number	%
Gender	Female	4	44	26	55
	Male	5	56	21	45
Race	Black, Non- Hispanic	2	22	4	9
	White, Non- Hispanic	7	78	43	91
Highest Degree Earned	Bachelor	4	44	12	26
	Masters	5	56	35	74

Freshman Cluster Demographics in Relation to the School's Demographics

Note. School data was obtained from the State Department of Education.

Instrument Validity and Reliability

Three types of data collection instruments – survey, interview guides, and an observation protocol were used in this study. The instruments were developed based on the DeSocio et al. (2007) research study along with the Robbins and Searby (2013) research study, and other research studies with the following sub-questions in mind: How does this school-based team learn to work productively together? How do the team members interpret productive or effective? What are the team members' perceptions of the critical factors for developing a

productive team? How do the team members perceive their level of collective efficacy as a member of the freshman cluster? For example, is the dialogue consistently focused on the examination of evidence/data related to performance and the attainment of goals? Do team members participate equally in group dialogue – there are no dominators or hibernators in the group? Are team meetings purposefully facilitated and utilize protocols to structure, guide discussions, and review results for the following action plan? Table 3 is an overview of the data collection in reference to each research question.

Table 3

Research Question	Data Collection Instrument
What is the impact of the freshman cluster	Attendance records, credits
on student attendance and credits earned?	earned data
What were the freshman cluster's practices, processes, and activities that impacted student attendance and credits earned?	Interviews, field observation
Why were the practices, processes, and activities effective according to the freshmen cluster's perspective?	Survey, field observation, interviews

Overview Data Collection Table

Survey

The London Leadership Academy National Health Service questionnaire with a Cronbach value of α =.77 was adapted from 56 questions to 13 questions for this study (Shahid & Din, 2021). The researcher customized the survey items to collect facts and information based on the research literature to better fit the purpose of this study. Two questions were used from the team processes domain and one question was used from each of the other domains. The last four

questions were researcher developed based on the literature review and the Theory of Change theoretical framework. The survey was provided to two peers to evaluate and ensure the questions effectively captured the topic being investigated.

Interview Guides

The semi-structured open-ended questions for the interviews were researcher developed and scripted based on Rubin and Rubin's (2012) responsive interviewing method. The responsive interviewing method is grounded on the conversational partnership formed between the researcher and the participant(s). This allowed the researcher to understand and create meaning through the experiences of the participant's words and stories.

Member checking was also utilized to improve the interview sessions' reliability and validity. Member checking is the process of verifying the researcher's interpretation of the meaning regarding the participants' experiences with the participants who experienced it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), member checking can be performed during the interview process, at the conclusion of the study, or both. It helps improve the credibility, accuracy, and transferability of the study. This implies the researcher summarized the information and then questioned the participants to determine accuracy. This allowed the participants to agree or disagree on whether the synopses reflected their feelings, views, and experiences. This also provided the researcher an opportunity to understand and assess the participants' experience, reinforce credibility and validity, limit personal biases within the study, and give the participants an opportunity to correct errors and challenge information perceived as wrong interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview guides were provided to two peers to evaluate and ensure the questions effectively captured the topic being investigated.

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Observation Protocol

The research study conducted by DeSocio et al. (2007) guided the field observation. The observation protocol for this study was also researcher-developed. The observation protocol was provided to two peers to evaluate and ensure the questions effectively captured the topic being investigated.

The field observation allowed the researcher to observe the participants in the context of their work environment and gain insight into how the team operates. To ensure that the observation protocol actually measured what it intended to measure, the researcher utilized a first-person and third-person point of view to obtain the desired detailed notes on the freshman cluster meeting's content and structure as well as the relationships and team dynamics. According to DeMonbrun et al., (n.d.), the first-person point of view allows the researcher to describe specifically what he or she observed or experienced during the data collection process by taking detailed field notes and the third-person point of view allows the researcher to capture exactly what the team members said and did during the observation by recording the meeting. This permitted the researcher to collect rich descriptive qualitative data in the most natural setting. It also helped increase the reliability and validity of the observation instrument.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked: What is the impact of the freshman cluster on student attendance and credits earned? The process to determine the answer to this question began with the establishment of a population guideline that only included students who transferred to this school from eighth grade and were enrolled in this school during their entire first year of high school. A data request was submitted to the district's Student Information & Reporting Office

and spreadsheets were received via email containing student attendance records and credits earned during a student's first year of high school.

First, the attendance records were examined. The attendance records included school years 2012-13 and 2013-2014 – the last two years before the freshman cluster implementation and school years 2014-15 to 2016-17 – after the implementation of the school cluster and before the attendance tracking change. Attendance is now tracked by the minute and not by days. Table 4 is a summary of the data.

Table 4

Student Attendance Records Summary for the 2012-2017 School Years

	P	Attendance Rates	8	
	School Year	Mean %	Median %	
*	2012-13	92.8	95.0	
*	2013-14	93.9	96.1	
	2014-15	94.7	96.6	
	2015-16	93.3	96.1	
	2016-17	91.8	94.9	

Note. * Denotes freshmen class before freshman cluster implementation.

Obtained spreadsheet via email from the data reporter from the district.

An F-test was conducted using Excel to determine if the two groups had equal variances and which *t*-test to perform. A two-tailed F-test was performed with the significance level for analysis set at $\alpha = .05$. The null and alternative hypotheses below were developed. Null Hypothesis: There is no difference in the variance between the two populations

regarding attendance rates.

Alternative Hypothesis: There is a difference in the variance between the two

populations regarding attendance rates.

The variance before the freshman cluster was .006 and the variance after the freshman cluster was .007. The results of the F-test are in Table 5 below.

Table 5

	Attendance Before Freshman Cluster	Attendance After Freshman Cluster
Mean	0.933508816	0.93280396
Variance	0.006019705	0.007361571
Observations	397	505
df	396	504
F	0.817720214	
P(F<=f) one-tail	.017698169	
F Critical one-tail	0.854510104	

F-Test: Two-Sample for Variances

The p = .017698 is less than the alpha level set at .05. The null hypothesis was rejected. There is a significant difference between the variances, and it was assumed that the variances are not equal. A Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances two-tailed *t*-test was then performed to determine if the freshman cluster had a significant impact on the ninth-grade students' attendance rates. The results of the *t*-test are in Table 6 below.

Table 6

	Attendance Before Freshman Cluster	Attendance After Freshman Cluster
Mean	0.933508816	.093280396
Variance	0.006019705	0.007361571
Observations	397	505
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	883	
t Stat	0.129248995	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.448595032	
	Attendance Before Freshman Cluster	Attendance After Freshman Cluster
t Critical one-tail	1.646581123	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.897190063	
t Critical two-tail	1.962654212	

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

The p = .897190 is greater than the alpha level set at .05. There was no significant difference between the two groups of attendance records. No evidence exists that the freshman cluster had an impact on student attendance.

Students with five or more credits at the end of their freshman year are considered ontrack with their credits for graduation. The credits earned data included school years 2012-13 and 2013-2014 – the last two years before the freshman cluster implementation and school years 2014-15 to 2021-22 – after the implementation of the school cluster. Table 7 is a summary of the data.
Table 7

	School Year	Total # of Students	Mean	Median	Student with 5 + Credits	Student with less than 5 Credits	% On- Track with Credits	% Off- Track with Credits
*	2012- 13	104	6.5	6.5	100	4	96	4
*	2013- 14	123	6.8	6.5	116	7	94	6
	2014- 15	141	7.0	6.8	135	6	96	4
	2015- 16	125	7.0	6.5	123	2	98	2
	2016- 17	125	6.8	6.5	112	13	90	10
	2017- 18	128	7.0	6.8	127	1	99	1
	2018- 19	110	6.8	6.5	107	3	97	3
	2019- 20	130	6.9	6.8	130	0	100	0
	2020- 21	150	6.0	6.5	120	30	80	20
	2021- 22	133	6.5	6.5	119	14	89	11

Credits Earned 2012-2022 School Years

Note. * Denotes freshmen class before freshman cluster implementation.

Obtained spreadsheet via email from the data reporter from the district.

First, an F-test was conducted using Excel to determine if the two groups had equal

variances and which t-test to perform. A two-tailed F-test was performed with an alpha level of

.05. The null and alternative hypotheses below were developed.

Null Hypothesis: There is no difference in the variance between the two populations regarding credits earned.

Alternative Hypothesis: There is a difference in the variance between the two populations regarding credits earned.

The variance before the freshman cluster was 1.82 and the variance after the freshman cluster was 2.46. The results of the F-test are in Table 8 below.

Table 8

	Credits Earned After	Credits Earned Before
	Freshman Cluster	Freshman Cluster
Mean	6.713891555	6.635682819
Variance	2.456833136	1.822815793
Observations	1042	227
df	1041	226
F	1.347823047	
P(F<=f) one-tail	0.002885628	
F Critical one-tail	1.192967663	

F-Test: Two-Sample for Variances

The p = .002886 is less than the alpha level set at .05. The null hypothesis was rejected. There is a significant difference between the variances, and it was assumed that the variances are not equal. A Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances two-tailed *t*-test was then performed to determine if the freshman cluster had a significant impact on the ninth-grade students' credits earned. The results of the *t*-test are in Table 9 below.

Table 9

	Credits Earned Before Freshman Cluster	Credits Earned After Freshman Cluster
Mean	6.635682819	6.713891555
Variance	1.822815793	2.456833136
Observations	227	1072
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	371	
t Stat	-0.767348819	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.221681106	
	Credits Earned Before Freshman Cluster	Credits Earned After Freshman Cluster
t Critical one-tail	1.648971159	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.443362212	
t Critical two-tail	1.966378803	

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

The p = .443362 is greater than the alpha level set at .05. There was no significant difference between the two groups concerning credits earned. No evidence exists that the freshman cluster had an impact on students' performance regarding credits earned.

Both test results found no statistically significant increases or decreases in the attendance and credits earned before the implementation of the freshman cluster and after the implementation of the freshman cluster.

Research Question 2

The second research question asked: What were the freshman cluster's practices, processes, and activities that impacted student attendance and credits earned? The process to determine the answer to this question began with the examination of the interview transcripts and

then the observation field notes which provided clarity and depth to the study and greatly enhanced the evaluation.

The interviews data generated themes specific to a) a time of growth for the ninth-grade students, b) continuous interventions, c) teachers dissatisfied with the administration's inadequate support, and d) a genuine concern for the students.

The researcher uploaded the interview transcripts in Dedoose. Dedoose is a web-based application where you can upload research data to organize and analyze (Dedoose, n.d.). Three rounds of inductive color-coding within the web-based application were completed. An inductive color-coding process is where the codes are derived from the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The results of the inductive color-coding process yielded the codes listed in Table 10.

Table 10

Code Matrix

Id	Parent Id	Depth	Title	Description
**1		0	Administration Leadership	Leadership interactions and support
*2		0	Parental Support	Engaged parents
*3		0	Student Motivators	Incentives
***4	3	1	Barriers - Students	Barriers created by student actions
***5		0	Team Roles and Responsibilities	Team Goals and Objectives
***6	5	1	Activities	Events that create engagements
*7	6	2	Effective	Activities team members find effective
*8	6	2	Ineffective	Activity implemented and was not successful

Id	Parent Id	Depth	Title	Description
***9	5	1	Barriers – Programs and Supplies	Barriers encountered related to supplies
***10	5	1	Practices	On-going goal or interest

Note. * Denotes Focus group: Teachers

** Denotes Interviews: Administrators – Principal/Counselors *** Denotes Compilation in a single chart

Table 11 presents the frequency each code was applied to an excerpt for each media file

with the **bold** numbers being more frequent and the *italicized* numbers being less frequent.

Table 11

Code Applications Matrix

									Barriers -		
									Programs		
	Administration	Parental	Student	Barriers -	Team Roles and				and		
	Leadership	Support	Motivators	Students	Responsibilities	Activities	Effective	Ineffective	Supplies	Practices	Totals
Respondent 9	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Respondent 8	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2
Respondent 7	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
Respondent 6	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Respondent 4	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
Respondent 3	6	2	1	5	4	10	3	0	1	10	42
Respondent 2	9	7	1	8	4	13	3	3	1	8	57
Respondent 1	2	1	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	8
Counselor	1	3	0	1	2	12	0	0	2	12	33
Assistant Principal	0	0	0	1	4	17	0	0	0	14	36
Totals	22	13	4	16	20	53	6	3	5	45	0

Note. Counselor = Respondent 10 and Assistant Principal = Respondent 5.

Most high schools across the country noted truancy, discipline referrals, and failures as the highest among ninth-grade students (Habeeb, 2013). Analysis of the codes revealed that the freshman cluster members put emphasis on activities and practices as the primary focus for supporting ninth-grade students. Over half (52%) of the coded excerpts were activities or practices – 53 (28%) activities and 45 (24%) practices which aided in answering research question 2.

Table 12 provides information about how the code/tag system was used across all

excerpts. This symmetric code-by-code matrix presents the frequencies for which all coded

pairings were applied to the same excerpt and overlapping excerpts.

Table 12

Code Co-Occurrence Matrix

	Administration	Parental	Student	Barriers -	Team Roles and				Barriers - Programs and		
	Leadership	Support	Motivators	Students	Responsibilities	Activities	Effective	Ineffective	Supplies	Practices	Totals
Administration Leadership	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Parental Support	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	3
Student Motivators	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Barriers - Students	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Team Roles and											
Responsibilities	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Activities	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	6
Effective	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Ineffective	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Barriers - Programs and	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Supplies	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Practices	0	0	0	2	0	3	0	0	0	0	5
Totals	0	3	1	2	0	6	2	0	1	5	0

These patterns illustrate how concepts related to research question 2 and represented by the code system are combined in the natural schema. According to the matrix, there is a combination pattern when respondents naturally discussed activities and practices. Those numbers are in **bold**. Additionally, when respondents discussed practices, they also discussed barriers pertaining to students. Although the co-occurrence matrix did not identify any patterns pertaining to the administration leadership code, 22 excerpts were identified during the coding process. Interestingly, teachers felt a lack of support or perceived lack of support from the district and building administration. During the focus group lack of training and lack of support came up repeatedly.

Respondent 1

We are left to our own devices and then if we need support, it's needed, do your own thing, then if we do need it, it is, right there, yeah.

Respondent 2

There should have been a training program. In my opinion, when they implemented the freshman clustered, so just throwing teachers. We're fortunate that when we started, there were a lot of experienced teachers who were teaching at the time. But in a lot of the schools, they were literally brand new teachers thrown into a group and said OK, work with these freshmen. And I think that that, you know, if you're investing in a program, you think the program is viable and valuable, that it it means there's there should be some training. Maybe people just don't know what that training should look like and what it should be. But there, it's out there and I think that you know there, there are things that we could be doing differently.

But I also think that, and I, you know, this is just my perspective of 36 years of teaching. When they started the freshman cluster, they just threw us people together. And there was actually no training. On on how people work together, what our goals should be, what the vision should be.

...it's not support in terms of planning and procedure. It's it's all reactionary support. And I hope no one takes offense.

Because they have, you know, they have their own things that they're doing and they have their own jobs. It's very difficult for them to be here as well. But again, I think that gets back to the overall idea, you know, and I and again, anytime that you throw a group of teachers together, it's it's left really to the device of the teacher. Because there's no I mean the administrator can't be here every time. But you know so like I said it's reactionary. We have a problem, we'll call them, and the dean will come to a meeting or we'll have an academic issue the counselor or an administrator will come to the meeting. But I wouldn't say there is a necessary a support system; we are our support system. Then we reach out when we need it.

Respondent 3

Nobody wanted to work with the freshmen. So it's the least experienced teachers that kind of get thrown together and it's not something that they wanted to do before becoming vested in. So that that's a detriment that persay to our building but before any freshman academy program.

We have a great relationship with administrators. I would say anytime we call upon them for for support we do get it, but yeah. As we get busy, things sort of dissipate.

Table 13 is a list of the specific activities and practices that the participants reported and answers research question 2.

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Table 13

Practices, Processes, and Activities Cited in the Excerpts with Number of Occurrences

Practices
Meetings with the assistant principal of curriculum and counselors that pertain to course offerings (2)
Attending various after-school activities and events that create connectivity with students
Visiting classrooms to build relationships with teachers and faculty (2)
Modeling expectations (2)
Building relationships with students (4)
Meetings with teachers that provide suggestions/feedback (3)
Reflections (3)
Building processes and procedures (2)
Professional conduct (4) Supports, strategies, and interventions that position students for academic success (11)
Processes
Programming for upper classmen regarding their academics
Collaboration and shared leadership (10)
Organization and administration for student achievement (2)
Intervention implementations (3)
Activities
Meet with team members (3)

Observe classroom instructions

Provide classroom strategies (6)

Provide professional development

Meet with counselor

Create new elective classes (2)

Meet with parents and teachers Quarterly events for students Develop list of chronically absent students Make phone calls to families (7) Tutoring (9) Contact parents via emails and letters mailed (2) Hold class meetings with the freshmen Instructions on lockers Conferences with students (10) Develop list of students at-risk and/or failing (2) Provide social emotional learning

Note. () Indicates the count of each similar response.

The following excerpts from the focus group provide insights on the specific processes, practices, and activities that answer research question 2 as well.

Respondent 1

A golden ticket which is basically, a catch all, like if we feel like you're doing something extraordinary, we give you a golden ticket that allows you to put points towards your grade, towards the older assignment, gets you a free bathroom pass should you run out. So, students are starting to finally put in that strive for it. We are also meeting with the elementary teachers more heavily this year. Trying to gain some support from them as far as like, a prime example for math is the arithmetic skills and the readiness for high school. Trying to hammer that and make sure that they're prepared to come to high school. So we'll be continuing those conversations here in February."

Respondent 2

We're constantly reevaluating interventions that we've tried to do by implementing different ones based on particular students.

Below are a few excerpts from the focus group pertaining to specific activities and practices that the participants reported were successful and not successful which also aided in answering research question 2.

Respondent 2

We've tried in the past to have like common rules and common expectations, and honestly, they don't always work. Because you know, so much of it is dependent on our personalities. And so I think that you know even though we've tried to have common expectations, I think that there's always faltered a little bit with that. We tried, and it just didn't work. We wanted to actually have a freshman study hall one year. We thought that would work in particular by putting it as a first hour and the kids who were really struggling with attendance and tardies because of you know, not their fault the parents are late. That would be an opportunity for them to have a study hall that would not impact their learning because they're coming late, you know, 20 minutes late to English. But that didn't work.

Respondent 3

I think, the important strategies or interventions that we utilized that stands out to me is post-COVID last year when we had a high failure rate of freshmen. We identified those kids at the beginning of the third quarter that failed two or more classes so we could talk to each individual to help encourage those students.

The researcher observed one freshman cluster meeting (Appendix I). Based on the observation regarding the school-based team's relationships and dynamics, it appeared everyone respected each other and acted as colleagues. The lead teacher invited everyone's input. During the meeting, everyone's suggestions and comments were heard and considered. One teacher was more vocal than the other teachers. It appeared the team focused on the agreement approach. The lead teacher utilized the consulting method – inviting input from others and the consensus method - talking until everyone agrees to one decision. According to Lencioni and Okabayashi (2008), this team appeared to lack trust – reluctant to be vulnerable within the team, feared conflict – sought artificial harmony over constructive passionate debate, and avoided accountability – circumventing the responsibility to call team members and administrators on counterproductive behavior which sets low standards which match three of the five dysfunctions of a team listed in the book. The other two dysfunctions listed in the book – lack of commitment and inattention to team results were not found from the one observation. At the end of the observation, one of the team members offered to share the Google Classroom the team created in June 2019 for the freshman cluster. It housed all their agendas, minutes, PowerPoints, and videos shared with the students, etc. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), artifact data often reveals details not often revealed in other qualitative data forms.

The transcript from the recorded field observation, the observation protocol, and the Google Classroom artifact was analyzed for common themes. The analysis yielded the following themes: a) an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect among the freshman cluster team members, b) absence or insufficiency of administrative support, and c) a sincere, open engagement among the team members. Although the observation focused more on what the freshman cluster did versus what the team members said, the themes that emerged from the observation were similar

to the themes and codes that emerged from the interview transcripts.

Table 14 below lists the practices and activities found in the Google Classroom that also assisted in answering research question 2.

Table 14

Activities and Practices Posted in the Google Classroom

Activities for the Students	Practices
Freshman orientation (3)	Attend district freshman cluster meeting
Shared dress-code PowerPoint	Phone calls to parents (7)
Video/Presentation (3)	Create unsat/failure list (12)
Mandatory study tables (2)	Classroom strategies (2)
Frosh Day (2)	Community Building
Digital Parent Night	Discuss outcomes - what worked what needs to change (2)
Challenge Day	Incentives (3)
Mindfulness (4)	Interventions (5)
Breakfast for students who achieved C's or better in all classes Individual Study Sessions - Mindfulness exercises and	Parent Conference (3)
Assignment Makeups (2)	Student Conference (5)
Guest Speaker	Professional Development (6)
Ice cream social (3)	Freshman Cluster mission and vision (2)
	Community Partner (4)
	Proactive / Reactive Groups (7)

Note. () Indicates the count of each similar response.

Historically there has been a focus on strategies and interventions to improve the high school transition. Respondent 2 stated, "The biggest problem our kids are having is attendance, the ones who are failing." For example, it was posted several times the creation of an unsat/failure list and making calls to parents along with utilizing the proactive/reactive groups as the primary focus for supporting ninth-grade students. Based on the data presented in the tables

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and the excerpts obtained from the transcripts, the perceived processes and practices that significantly impacted student attendance and credits earned included collaboration, shared leadership, and continuous implementation of supports, strategies, and interventions. The perceived activities that significantly impacted student attendance and credits earned included conferences with students, tutoring, and calls home to families.

Research Questions 3

The third research question asked: Why were the practices, processes, and activities effective according to the freshmen cluster's perspective? The process to determine the answer to this question began with the response choices tallied using Excel. Then the findings were corroborated with the findings from the historical data, field observation, and interviews. This allowed the researcher to triangulate the data and obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena as well as increase the credibility and validity of the findings.

Based on the responses from the survey and the literature review, the freshman cluster found the practices, processes, and activities effective because they found the team to be operative based on a meaningful shared purpose, an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect among the members, a genuine concern for the students, and the continuous implementation of interventions and support. However, most of the respondents disagreed that the practices, processes, and activities yielded a collective desired outcome. It was found that some practices, processes, and activities were effective for some students and some practices, processes, and activities were not effective for other students. Table 15 is the data generated from the survey.

Table 15

Survey Questions and Response Tallies

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
1. Purpose and					
Goals					
Our team has a					
meaningful, shared					
purpose.	2	7	0	0	9
2. Team Koles					
ream members					
their roles	2	6	1	0	o
a Trans B	۷.	O	1	U	I
J. Ieam Processes					
results in effective					
solutions	1	7	1	0	a
	-	,		0	3
4. ream Processes					
team-based	2	7	Ο	0	a
5. Team	2	1	0	0	9
Relationships					
Team members					
appreciate one					
another's unique					
capabilities.	3	5	1	0	9
6. Team Intergroup					
Relationships					
We are able to resolve					
conflicts within the	-				_
team collaboratively.	1	8	0	0	9
7. Team Problem-					
Solving					
Team members take					
personal responsibility					
for the effectiveness of					
our team.	1	5	3	0	9
8. Team Passion					
and Commitment					
Working on our team					
inspires people to do					
their best.	2	6	1	0	9
9. Team Skills and					
Learning					
We have the skills we					
need to do our jobs					
effectively.	2	6	1	0	9
10. Perspective on					
Activities and					
Outcomes					
Ninth-grade students					
off-track with their					
academics were					
identified early and					
acted upon with an					
intervention.	2	6	1	0	9
11. Perspective on					_
Activities and					
Outcomes					
Ninth-grade students					
in need of extra					
learning support were					
provided extra					
support, such as					
tutoring, an academic					
plan, mentoring, etc.	0	6	3	0	9
12. Perspective on					
Activities and					
The team completed					
follow-ups on the					
supports and					
interventions that are					
to meet the needs of					
the ninth-grade	0	8	1	0	9
13. Perspective on	v	5		v	<u> </u>
Activities and					
Outcomes					
Ninety percent of the					
students that were					
identified as at-risk					
are on-track with their					
credits.	0	1	7	1	9

Summary

This chapter began with an introduction to the freshman cluster – a school-based team created to support ninth-grade students during their first year of high school. The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of the school-based team. Centered on the Theory of Change and the logic model, the data analysis included one-on-one interviews, a focus group, a survey, observation, artifacts, and historical data. This allowed the researcher to triangulate the data and obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena as well as increase the credibility and validity of the findings. The following themes emerged from the analysis: 1) continuous interventions, 2) positive relationships, and 3) insufficient support from the administration. While several practices, processes, and activities were reported to be effective, no statistical evidence exists that the freshman cluster impacted student attendance rates and credits earned. Although the team was found to work well together, not all team members agreed the team achieved the desired results. Conclusions and recommendations based on the findings will be considered in Chapter 5.

Chapter V. Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter presents an overview of the study and its findings, expresses several conclusions and suggestions, and offers recommendations for further research. The first section is an overview of the study. It includes the objectives of the research study and the methodology utilized to complete the mixed-methods analysis. The next section discusses the findings of the three research questions. The findings are analyzed, interpreted, and synthesized to provide insights, patterns, and unexpected results. The following section discusses suggestions and limitations based on the research findings. It includes actionable steps and approaches for effective team-based learning. Lastly, recommendations for future research as it relates to ninth-grade students and school-based teams are presented.

Review of the Study

Obtaining a high school diploma is acknowledged globally as a significant life event that impacts the successful transition to adulthood. The high school dropout problem has been the focus of researchers, business and community leaders, and educators for decades (Camper et al., 2019). Although preparing students for a successful future does not end with a high school diploma, it is a critical first step. If we want to improve graduation rates, we must restructure high schools by changing ninth grade.

Research studies and journal articles indicate that attaining a smooth transition from middle school/junior high to high school may be challenging for most students, especially those identified as at-risk (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Benner et al., 2017; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014). Researchers agree that the first year of high school is crucial for adjustment, achievement, and the road to graduation (Crofton & Neild, 2018; Pileggi & Strouf, 2019; Willis et al., 2019). Although there is a plethora of research on the ninth-grade year and the reasons that lead to high school dropout, there is limited research on the use of school-based teams as a viable strategy to support ninth-grade students.

The purpose of the freshman cluster in this study was to support ninth-grade students during their year of transition to high school. The projected outcomes from a successful transition included (a) an increase in the number of students on track with their credits at the start of their sophomore year of high school (b) an increase in the attendance rate, and (c) an increase in the high school's graduation rate. The focus for this study was to 1) evaluate the freshman cluster school-based team at a school located in Northwest Ohio, 2) investigate the interventions provided to the students to support the transition to high school, and 3) obtain insight regarding the extent students experienced transition success.

School-based teams have become a key resource in school improvement. The performance of a work team is influenced by multiple factors. The multiple factors include team learning behaviors and team learning conditions, such as task interdependence or innate motivation (Decuyper et al., 2010). The literature review found strong evidence that collaboration works. According to Edmondson (2012), collaboration is an essential component for knowledge-intensive initiatives that entail non-routine tasks and tasks needing different kinds of competencies for successful outcomes.

This mixed-methods case study was conducted based on the Theory of Change theoretical framework and the logic model. The participants consisted of eight teachers, one assistant principal of curriculum and instruction, and one counselor. The study addressed the following three research questions:

1. What is the impact of the freshman cluster on student attendance and credits earned?

- 2. What were the freshman cluster's practices, processes, and activities that impacted student attendance and credits earned?
- 3. Why were the practices, processes, and activities effective according to the freshmen cluster's perspective?

The data presented in this study were obtained utilizing the following methods: 1) oneon-one interviews, 2) a focus group interview, 3) a survey, 4) a field observation, and 5) artifacts and historical data. The assistant principal of curriculum and instruction and the counselor provided the one-on-one interviews. The one-on-one interviews provided information and insight regarding their positions and responsibility as members of the school-based team. The focus group consisted of eight teachers. The focus group provided insights that pertained to the experiences of each teacher on the team, the practices, processes, and activities of the schoolbased team, and some of the challenges of functioning as a team. A survey was disseminated for the team members to complete. Nine out of the ten team members completed the survey. The survey provided insight into the team members' opinions and beliefs regarding the effectiveness of the school-based team. One team meeting was observed. The observation consisted of the eight teachers which provided insight into the team's behaviors, the internal relations between the team members, and productivity. The Google Classroom artifact which was created prior to the pandemic provided various practices and activities, such as agendas, checklists, and meeting templates. Finally, the historical data which included student attendance records and the credits earned data provided the results and the significant impact of the team's practices, processes, and activities.

The school-based team did not prove to lead to a significant increase in student attendance rates and credits earned, however, the teachers perceived the school-based team as

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effective due to the continuous implementation of practices and interventions. Despite the lack of statistical gain, the study revealed specific practices, processes, and activities that were beneficial during the transition of ninth-grade students. According to the school-based team members, some practices, incentives, and activities were utilized more often than others because those were found to be successful and met the unique needs of the ninth-grade students.

Interestingly, the study further revealed that the teachers were dissatisfied with the lack of training provided by the district administrators on how people work together as a team, clear expectations, and how data should be the driving force. The teachers reported some teachers volunteered to be on the school-based team while others did not. Teachers were also dissatisfied with the inadequate support provided by the building administrators. One teacher pointed out that the support received from the building administrators was more reactive instead of proactive. Based on the quality of teamwork determines the rise and fall of schools (Sparks, 2013).

Discussion

It is evident that the transition to high school is a critical time and that transition programs offer opportunities to intervene and support our most at risk students. Since every school is unique in its culture, climate, students, and staff, there are several freshman transition models to consider. Each model encompasses its own version of components found in best practices, which were discussed in the literature review.

This study examined a teaming model called the freshman cluster. Prior to the study, it was noted that the freshman cluster was an initiative implemented to provide support or programming for all students during their first year of high school. It was also noted that some students required additional support during their first year of high school. The fact that this study affirmed this was not a surprise. It was interesting that both t-test results found no statistically significant increases or decreases in the attendance and credits earned before the implementation of the freshman cluster and after the implementation of the freshman cluster. However, it is believed that this study showed the real and perceived impact transitions can have on individual students versus all students collectively. The student data where the students were listed individually showed slight increases in student attendance and credits earned for most students.

It was surprising that the focus group found the administration support reactive. They reported that they were not provided with the necessary professional development or training to function as an effective team. One respondent reported needing training in how to work effectively together as a team. They felt they were just thrown together as a team and provided no clear directions, expectations, or goals. Despite the lack of administrative support felt by most of the teachers, the freshman cluster perceived the team as effective and believed they were having an impact. They agreed the team to be operative based on a meaningful shared purpose, an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect among the members, a genuine concern for the students, and the continuous implementation of interventions and support which created a collective teacher efficacy. Collective teacher efficacy is the belief that "teachers in a given school make an educational difference to their students over and above the educational impact of their homes and communities" (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004).

When the freshman cluster members found an intervention that did not produce the desired outcome, they implemented a different intervention that would better meet the needs of the ninth-grade students. For example, the freshman cluster had the assistant principal of instruction and curriculum create a study hall first period for all the freshmen students due to the number of tardies and missed instructional hours. Some students were tardy to school every day

because they had to take a younger sibling to their elementary school which had a later start time. Many students depended on their parents for transportation to school. Unfortunately, the first period study hall was not successful. The fact that the freshman cluster continuously implemented various strategies and interventions is why the team perceived the freshman cluster as effective and having an impact. The teachers believed the continuously implemented practices, processes, and activities were meeting the needs of the students. The teachers believed through their collective actions it influenced student outcomes and increased the number of students on track for graduation after their first year of high school. According to Donohoo (2016), if educators' realities are filtered through the belief that they can influence student achievement and positive student outcomes, then it is likely these beliefs will manifest in their practice.

The amount of research and investment a school is willing to commit towards a schoolbased team and a ninth-grade transition program will determine the potential impact and successful outcomes the ninth-grade students obtain during the transition. While the freshman cluster does not encompass some of the major structural changes recommended in the literature such as block scheduling or ninth grade academies, supporting students with a school-based team using the teaming model has proven to be an effective strategy for at-risk students. This study affirmed that schools do not necessarily have to opt for a major renovation of their structure or schedule in order to support students during the critical first year of high school. The teachers believed specific transition practices, processes, and activities found in this study were essential in keeping the ninth-grade students on-track.

Research Question 1

Research question one asked: What is the impact of the freshman cluster on student attendance and credits earned? The question was examined through the use of historical data which were quantitative in nature. The freshman class attendance rates mean before the freshman cluster was 93.4%. The freshman class attendance rates mean after the freshman cluster was 93.3% which is .1% less than the mean before the freshman cluster. The results of this data can be seen in Table 4: Attendance Records 2012-2017 School Years.

The mean percentage of students on track with their credits at the start of their sophomore year prior to the implementation of the freshman cluster was 95%. The mean percentage of students on track with their credits at the start of their sophomore year after the freshman cluster was 94%, which was 1% less than the mean before the freshman cluster. The two years during COVID may have skewed the data. The results of this data can be seen in Table 7.

The outcome of this data is not unexpected. The findings from this study paralleled findings from some of the studies presented in the literature review that focused on effective school-based teams. The studies of Kayler and Sherman (2009), Somers and Piliawsky (2004), and Bahr et al. (1999) also reported no statistical significance. Despite no statistical significance found in this study, the survey results reported the freshman cluster members perceived the freshman cluster as effective.

A significant body of scholarship has investigated reasons that influence students to become disengaged and drop out of high school. Like this study that is focused on the impact of a school-based team, the literature review presented different strategies and interventions as necessary for a student population with diverse needs. Although some studies presented in the literature review did find statistical significance and effective strategies and interventions (DeSocio et al., 2007; McKee & Caldarella, 2016; Robbins & Searby, 2013; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004; Styron & Peasant, 2010; Suntisukwongchotem, 2006;), some strategies and interventions alone are not sufficient to change attendance significantly or increase student achievement for all students. Not all policies, interventions, and strategies will work with everyone, and a variety of strategies and interventions should be implemented based on the needs of the students. However, the freshman cluster found the practices, processes, and activities effective because they found the team to be operative based on a meaningful shared purpose, an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect among the members, a genuine concern for the students, and the continuous implementation of interventions and support which created a collective efficacy among the teachers on the freshman cluster.

Research Question 2

Research question two asked: What were the freshman cluster's practices, processes, and activities that impacted student attendance and credits earned? The question was examined using the focus group interview transcripts, the observation field notes, and the Google Classroom artifact which were qualitative in nature. Results indicated that the three most common practices, processes and activities with the desired outcomes pertaining to attendance and credits earned were collaboration, shared leadership, and continuous implementation of supports, strategies, and interventions. Results indicated that the three most common activities with desired outcomes pertaining to attendance and credits earned were conferences with students, tutoring, and calls home to families. The results of this data can be seen in Table 13.

The literature review suggests that students drop out of school for various reasons before earning their high school diploma. McKee and Caldarella (2016) found high school GPA, attendance, and course failures as strong predictors for students dropping out of high school. Researchers and practitioners have emphasized the importance of supporting students during the first year of high school. With previous studies showing that freshmen identified as at-risk are more likely to drop out of school than freshmen students who are not identified as at-risk, school-based teams can provide viable support and interventions that educators can utilize to improve school attendance and credits earned for students at-risk of not graduating on time or at all (Benner et al., 2017; Emmett & McGee, 2012).

The outcome data for this study is not unexpected although it is clear that targeting specific students can have a significant impact on student achievement. The freshman cluster provided support for all the ninth-grade students by implementing 1) practices that included various support, strategies, and interventions (i.e., conferences with students, instructional strategies suggestions, discussions on what worked and what needs to change), 2) processes that included collaboration and shared leadership (i.e., professional development and community building), and 3) activities that included conferences with the students, tutoring, and phone calls to the families (i.e., mindfulness exercises and assignment makeups). According to the focus group, this study confirmed that students with a positive and supportive relationship with their teachers are more engaged and had academic achievement (Hughes & Chen, 2011).

The fact that the freshman cluster members believed the practices, processes, and activities helped them help the nineth-grade students, contributed to how they viewed the efficacy of the various practices, processes, and activities along with the effectiveness of the school-based team. The outcomes revealed in this study duplicated many of the findings presented in the literature review that also focused on school-based teams along with the practices, processes, and activities. While the t-tests for this study found no statistically significant increases or decreases in the attendance and credits earned before the implementation

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of the freshman cluster and after the implementation of the freshman cluster for the students collectively, it does suggest that there may be a moderate level of practical benefit to the schoolbased team's ability to stabilize the attendance rates and credits earned for students individually. The findings from this study does affirm the research and why school-based teams are necessary for ninth-grade students and how experts recommend they be structured in a school.

Research Questions 3

Research question three asked: Why were the practices, processes, and activities effective according to the freshmen cluster's perspective? The question was examined through the use of a survey and the focus group which were quantitative and qualitative in nature respectively. Results indicated that the freshman cluster team found the practices, processes, and activities effective due to collective efficacy. They believed the team to be operative based on a meaningful shared purpose, an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect among the members, a genuine concern for the students, and the continuous implementation of interventions and support. The freshman cluster reported implementing several programs to address the ninthgrade transition. The programs included the freshman orientation, a freshman study hall, and the freshman advisory. The research literature, Cooper and Markoe-Hayes (2005) supported these programs in noting students are anxious regarding the larger physical layouts of the high schools and the increased number of students on campus. Smith et al. (2006) also noted students with anxieties were associated with the physical environment of high school. Implementing the freshman orientation and freshman advisory programs are also congruent with Somers and Piliawsky (2004) research, noting participation in programs that provide practices, processes, and activities (i.e., tutoring; mentoring; student conferences; family conferences; review of student

attendance, grades, and course failures; incentives, etc.) resulted in fewer students being retained in ninth-grade.

Although the study did not show the freshman cluster provided intensive support that some students require (i.e., literacy skills like reading and writing), the focus group agreed the freshman cluster provided a caring community, positive relationships, and consistency that intertwined throughout the experiences of the team members and the ninth-grade students.

Conclusion

This study supports Robbins and Searby's (2013) research of an interdisciplinary schoolbased team. The freshman cluster 1) met regularly as a team, 2) developed team approaches to problem-solve issues, 3) created team procedures and expectations, 4) communicated to students and parents regularly, and 5) conducted all conferences as a team. This study also supports the research conducted by Goddard et.al., (2017) on the role of collective efficacy. Collective efficacy is about the great power that teams have to impact change when they share the belief in their ability to solve problems and overcome challenges.

Although many facets are involved in the transition from middle/junior high school to high school, the continuous implementation of interventions and incentives by the school-based team suggested a positive trend in student attendance and credits earned individually vs. collectively. Other high schools will find generalization not likely but educational leaders seeking ways to improve the transition to high school and student outcomes can consider implementing the various strategies and interventions found in this study.

Although it was reported by the school-based team members of not receiving adequate training or having an explicit model of team development and a guide for performance or outcomes, a strong planning team, poised with knowledge of the school and students became an

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essential component of the school improvement plan for increasing the graduation rate. Evidence of challenges and resolutions of the challenges demonstrated all team members committed and working together for the good of the students which resulted in mutual respect and genuine unity of purpose.

The freshman cluster provided a platform for the students and the freshman cluster members to build trust and develop a network of relationships within the community. Ultimately, the school-based team created collective teacher efficacy and became an advocate for student development and success. Students are most likely to be engaged and stay engaged when they feel comfortable and where they feel accepted, which is the climate and culture the freshman cluster provided through its various practices and activities.

Recommendations

The following is recommended because the data collected from the freshman cluster concerning the school-based team may be applicable to other high schools that are similar. Based on the findings of this study, it appeared that the frequency of meetings was positively associated with the interaction process of exchanging information among the team members. It also appeared that there was a positive relationship between some of the practices, processes, and activities the school-based team had in place and the transition success that a student experienced. However, the school-based team was found to 1) lack group competence among the team members, 2) lack structure, and 3) challenging objectives and unclear goals. Therefore, the following recommendations for creating conditions for effective teamwork and a smooth transition for ninth-grade students are presented:

I recommend the administration provide professional development for the school-based team because one of the respondents reported not receiving professional development on how to work effectively together as a team – group tasks, group work, group performance strategies nor any clear directions, expectations, or goals. During the observation, it appeared the team focused on agreement and not commitment. The lead teacher utilized the consulting method – inviting input from others and the consensus method – talking until everyone agrees to one decision which was observed during the freshman cluster meeting. Unproductive meetings can deter enthusiasm and slow efforts, while effective team processes can excite and inspire, and drive progress. Professional development should focus on team building, building collegial relationships, helping the team members establish trust among the members, and team learning. According to the literature review, when support is provided for professional development significant value is placed on continuous learning and the ability to conduct effective teamwork (Bahr et al., 1999; Dimmitt, 2003; Suntisukwongchote, 2006).

I recommend the freshman cluster build a strong transition program by collaborating with the teachers and the administrators of the feeder elementary schools because during the focus group one respondent reported that the freshman cluster has reached out to the eighth-grade teachers in the past, but the eighth-grade teacher turnout was always very low. A collaboration program between the feeder schools and the high school could range from a one-time informational assembly with all the feeder schools to comprehensive monthly meetings among teachers, counselors, and administrators. This will help cultivate a positive relationship between the feeder schools and the high school.

I recommended that the freshman cluster develop several targeted intervention programs because the Frosh Day is a one-day orientation. Although the Frosh Day includes a tour of the building, assistance with reading their schedules, opening locks for their lockers, information about sports and activities, etc., the additional targeted intervention programs would provide

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students identified as being at risk of dropping out of high school extra opportunities to become familiar with the facilities and procedures at the new school. This would also allow the at-risk students to gain personal connections that may lead to relationships with specific staff members such as counselors or content teachers, along with older students that they may find as mentors or role models. The targeted intervention programs would make the transition to high school easier and more likely to engage at-risk students.

I recommend that the freshman cluster conduct a yearly assessment of the team's practices, process, and activities because it will provide data on whether the desired outcomes are being met.

Limitations

Several factors contributed to the limitations of this study. First, due to the convenience and purposive sampling process to select participants in this mixed-methods study, the results from this study cannot be generalized to all studies of a similar subject matter nor to the general population of teachers. A second limiting factor was the location of the research site. This case study only focused on one school in an urban school district located in Northwest Ohio. Another limitation factor was the number of years of experience of the teachers who participated in the study varied. Other teachers may not have the same experiences with the transition practices and strategies thought to support ninth-grade transitions. Another limitation is that some teachers who volunteered to take part in the school-based team could possess perceptions that differed from teachers who did not choose to participate in the school-based team. A fifth limitation was the use of a retrospective causal-comparative study design versus a quasi-experimental design that would have allowed a more rigorous investigation of efficacy. To determine if this research is relevant to other schools, further research would need to be conducted. Each school is a community with educational differences that would need to be addressed when implementing a collaborative culture that contributes to improved student achievement. Although each school is a community with educational differences, the current administration may find value in some of the findings that identify specific processes and practices that could be replicated in their building to encourage purposeful collaboration and an increase in student achievement.

Future Research Opportunities

Based on the literature review, many aspects of this research can provide ideas for future research in understanding the conditions of effective teams and teamwork. The school-based team established at an urban school in Northwest Ohio was designed to increase the number of freshmen on track with their credits after their first year of high school. Recognizing barriers and planning for these challenges can help school-based teams in meeting the diverse needs of the students. It is important for schools to monitor changes that impact graduation rates at the state or federal level to implement programmatic changes as needed. As the needs of the schools and students continue to evolve, so do graduation requirements and societal expectations. Therefore, it is imperative to understand what schools have done in the past in order to plan for what schools should do in the future.

Looking at other school-based teams would be beneficial. Although this study generated valuable data regarding the perspectives of the freshman cluster team members, it is unknown the perception of the eighth-grade teachers who had a vested interest in helping the students prepare and navigate the transitional period from middle/junior high school to high school. Turner (2007) conducted a quantitative study examining how psychologically prepared inner-city

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youth are before and during the transition to high school. The study found evidence that psychological preparation to transition into high school is related to academic performance, career development skills efficacy, support from significant others, and social/environmental barriers. Identifying and employing specific programming for eighth-grade and ninth-grade students from an eighth-grade teacher's perspective might promote a highly successful transition to high school.

Students are also an audience with a key role in determining the impact of a school-based team's practices, processes, and activities. Along with the school-based team's practices, processes, and activities, other areas that could also impact students during their transition to high school include extracurricular activities, sports, a growing social life, family time, jobs, and their need for alone time or relaxation time. Benner et al. (2017) conducted a study and found that support in various contexts is vital for the well-being of diverse students during the transition to high school. A study that also consists of students' perceptions would allow the researcher to gain more information and a better understanding of student experiences during the transition into the ninth grade. By gaining student perceptions through surveys and student focus groups, a researcher could determine if the perception data for both groups align or if the two are unique.

Additional further research opportunities may include a multi-year research study to see if there is a valid cause and effect between the transition practices and the transition successes regarding attendance rates and credits earned throughout high school. This would permit the researcher to identify patterns or trends during the ninth-grade transition to high school and beyond. Although parents/guardians are typically the one constant in the students' lives, low parental involvement was reported during the focus group interview. Parents play a significant

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role in assisting their children to be productive members of society. A research study to determine parental perceptions of school-based teams' transition practices and activities for ninth-grade students could also provide best practices in engaging parents and increasing parental involvement.

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Appendix A

Ohio Revised Code Section 3313.617 – Adoption of Policy for Students at Risk of Not Qualifying for High School Diploma

(A) Develop criteria for identifying at-risk students, which shall include a student's lack of adequate progress in meeting the terms of a graduation plan developed or updated under division(E) of this section. The criteria also may include other factors, such as if a student has issues regarding excessive absences or misconduct.

(B) Develop procedures for identifying at-risk students. The procedures shall include a method for determining if a student is not making adequate progress in meeting the terms of a graduation plan developed or updated under division (E) of this section. The procedures shall allow for a student to be identified as at risk in each of grades nine through twelve. The procedures also may include the identification of students in other grades.

(C) Develop a notification process in which the district or school shall notify an at-risk student's parent, guardian, or custodian in each year in which the student has been identified as at risk. The notification process shall at least include providing a written notification to the at-risk student's parent, guardian, or custodian, which shall include all of the following:

(1) A statement that the student is at risk of not qualifying for a high school diploma;

(2) A description of the district's or school's curriculum requirements, or the student's individualized education program, and, as appropriate, the graduation conditions prescribed under section 3313.618 or 3313.619 of the Revised Code;

(3) A description of any additional instructional or support services available to the at-risk student through the district or school.

(D) Assist at-risk students with additional instructional or support services to help the students qualify for a high school diploma. The instructional and support services may include any of the following:

(1) Mentoring programs;

(2) Tutoring programs;

(3) High school credit through demonstrations of subject area competency under division (J) of section 3313.603 of the Revised Code;

(4) Adjusted curriculum options;

(5) Career-technical programs;

(6) Mental health services;

(7) Physical health care services;

(8) Family engagement and support services.

(E) (1) Develop a graduation plan for each student enrolled in grades nine through twelve in the district or school. The graduation plan shall address the student's academic pathway to meet the curriculum requirements specified by the district or school and satisfy the graduation conditions, as appropriate, under section 3313.618 or 3313.619 of the Revised Code.

(2) The graduation plan shall be developed jointly by the student and a representative of the district or school and updated each school year in which the student is enrolled in the district or school, until the student qualifies for a high school diploma. The district or school shall invite a student's parent, guardian, or custodian to assist in developing and updating the graduation plan.(3) A district or school shall include a student's lack of progress in meeting the terms of a graduation plan developed or updated under this division as both a criterion for identifying at-

risk students under division (A) of this section and a procedure for identifying at-risk students under division (B) of this section.

(4) A graduation plan developed under this section shall supplement a school district's policy on career advising adopted under section 3313.6020 of the Revised Code.

(5) A school district may use the individualized education program developed for a student pursuant to section 3323.08 of the Revised Code in lieu of developing a graduation plan under this division if the individualized education program contains academic goals substantively similar to a graduation plan (Graduation Plans and Policies for Identifying Students At Risk of Not Graduation, n.d.).

A TEAMING MODEL EVALUATION

Appendix B

Principal Approval

Sherry Reed Coogler <sreed@tps.org>

Freshman Cluster Research Project...

3 messages

Tue, Jul 19, 2022 at 7:39 PM

Sherry Reed Coogler <sreed@tps.org> To: Trudie Neely <tneely@tps.org> Bcc: Sherry Reed Coogler <sreed@tps.org>

Hi Trudy,

I pray all is well. I hope you are keeping cool in this hot weather we are having. I am contacting you because I have revised the research project I am working on for my dissertation and wanted to ensure I still have consent to conduct the mixed methods study on Rogers High School's freshman cluster.

The study aims to examine the processes, activities, and outcomes concerning the freshman cluster. I hope to gain the team's insights and perspectives. I wish to learn without prejudice the impact the freshman cluster has on ninth-grade students transitioning to high school and which practices are most effective in initiating and sustaining student engagement.

I propose to use the following data sets: a focus group interview with the teachers, individual interviews with the counselor and the assistant principal of curriculum & instruction, archival student data on credits earned after the first year of high school, several observations of the freshman cluster meetings, and a survey for the teachers, the counselor, and the assistant principal of curriculum & instruction to complete. No identifying information linking anyone, or their current position will be included in the data.

I look forward to your response. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Best regards,

Mrs. Sherry Coogler Assistant Principal Virtual Academy sreed@tps.org

"Today's STUDENTS are tomorrow's LEADERS!"

Trudie Neely <tneely@tps.org> To: Sherry Reed Coogler <sreed@tps.org>

Good morning, Yes, it is fine for you to conduct your study at Rogers High School. I am looking forward to seeing the data that you collect. [Quoted text hidden]

Sherry Reed Coogler <sreed@tps.org> To: Trudie Neely <tneely@tps.org>

Great, thank you so much! [Quoted text hidden]

Fri, Aug 12, 2022 at 10:41 AM

Fri, Aug 12, 2022 at 12:PM

Appendix C

IRB Approval

University of Findlay.		
	Institutional Review Board	
Date: Dec	cember 14, 2022	
To: Dr.	Jon Brasfield	
CC: She	erry Coogler	
RE: Pos Stu	sitioning Ninth Grade Students to Succeed: A School-based Team Evaluation Case	
Project Ex	xpiration date: December 14, 2023	
The Univer- utilizing hu one year on	sity of Findlay Institutional Review Board (IRB) has completed its review of your project man subjects and has granted authorization. This study has been approved for a period of ly. The project has been assigned the number <u>1701</u> .	
In order to d by the IRB the investig in a timely t printed above	comply with UF policy and federal regulations, human subject research must be reviewed on at least a yearly basis. If you have not completed your research within the year, it is ator's responsibility to ensure that the Progress Report is completed and sent to the IRB fashion. The IRB needs to process the re-approval before the expiration date, which is ve.	
Please note Understand you must co	that if any changes are made to the present study, you must notify the IRB immediately. that any proposed changes may not be implemented before IRB approval, in which case omplete an Amendment/Modification Report .	
Following t Certificate study.	the completion of the use of human subjects, the primary investigator must complete a of Compliance form indicating when and how many subjects were recruited for the	
Please refer project num	to the IRB policy and procedures manual for additional information. Please include the aber on any other documentation or correspondence regarding the study.	
Thank you IRB at (419	very much for your cooperation. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact 9) 434-4640 or email irb@findlay.edu.	
sincerely, Jaym	ula Kim	
Jaymelee K Co-Chair, Ii	im, Ph.D. nstitutional Review Board	
Ce: IRB O	ffice	

Appendix D



Informational Letter

Date: November 7, 2022

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a study of the processes, activities, and outcomes concerning a school-based team. I hope to learn without prejudice the effectiveness and impact a school-based team has on ninth-grade students transitioning to high school. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you were identified as a member of the school-based team. If you decide to participate, please complete and return the enclosed consent form.

A link to a survey will be sent to the email address you provided upon receipt of the consent form. The survey is designed to obtain participant demographic information and team members' perceptions of the team's processes, activities, and outcomes. It will take about 15 minutes. No benefits accrue to you for answering the survey, but your responses will be used to determine the effectiveness of the school-based team and to better understand the team's strengths and weaknesses for further support and development. Any discomfort or inconvenience to you derives only from the amount of time taken to complete the survey.

Also, upon receipt of the consent form, a mutually agreed day and time to meet for interviews will be scheduled to discuss the school-based team's processes, activities, and the implemented interventions that supported and promoted successful transitions for first-year high school students as well as mutually agreed days and times to conduct observations. The interview meetings should take about 1 hour, and the duration of the observations will only cover the scheduled freshman cluster meetings for one quarter. Again, no benefits accrue to you for the interview and observations, but your responses and the field notes will be used to determine the effectiveness of the school-based team and to better understand the team's strengths and weaknesses for further support and development. Any discomfort or inconvenience to you derives only from the amount of time taken to participate in the interview and observation sessions.

A TEAMING MODEL EVALUATION

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed. Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice any future relationships with The University of Findlay. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice. You will be

made aware of any information that varies from what has been provided to you and/or might affect your willingness to continue to participate in the project.

The survey, interview questions, and consent waiver have been approved by the Institutional Review Board at The University of Findlay which guarantees that research involving human subjects follows federal regulations. If you have any questions about your rights as a human subject please contact the IRB chair, at <u>irb@findlay.edu</u>.

We will submit the results of this study for publication in its entirety. The unprocessed data will be destroyed 3 years after publication. If you are interested in the project results, please email us for information on retrieving the data. Please keep a copy of this email for your records. If you have any questions regarding this project, feel free to contact Dr. Jon Brasfield at <u>brasfield@findlay.edu</u> or 336-391-7805.

This project is being completed as part of the graduation requirements for our Doctor of Education degree. If you have any questions about our project, you may contact us Sherry Coogler at reeds@findlay.edu or my research adviser, Dr. Jon Brasfield at brasfield@findlay.edu.

Thank you for your time.

Dr. Jon Brasfield and Sherry Coogler

Appendix E

University of Findlay.

Adult Research Consent Form

DATE: November 7, 2022

PROJECT TITLE:

AN EVALUATION CASE STUDY: A SCHOOL-BASED TEAM IMPACT ON NINTH-GRADE STUDENTS

PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR(S) AND CO-INVESTIGATORS:

Dr. Jon Brasfield, brasfield@findlay.edu (336) 391-7805 Sherry Reed Coogler reeds@findlay.edu (419) 320-1705

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

This case study aims to determine the effectiveness and impact of a school-based team on ninthgrade students on track with their credits.

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY PROCEDURES:

The researcher will meet with the freshman cluster team members as a group face-to-face to advise them of the study and their rights to participate in the study, as well as their rights not to participate in the study. A link to the survey will be emailed to the teachers upon completion of the consent form. Interviews and observations will be scheduled on mutually agreed days and times.

DURATION/TIME ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR INVOLVEMENT:

The survey will take no longer than 15 minutes. The focused-group and individual interviews will take approximately 60 minutes each. Field observations will last the duration of the scheduled freshman cluster meetings.

POTENTIAL RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS:

Any discomfort or inconvenience to the participants derives only from the amount of time taken to complete the survey or participate in the focused group or individual interviews. During the focus-group session, there may be social risks as subjects are commenting in a group setting. The focus-group questions could in some circumstances cause the participants a small degree of distress. For example, the questions related to their experiences with colleagues may remind the participants of an unpleasant time, which could cause a small degree of distress. A data breach could result in embarrassment and strained relationships for colleagues and peers.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS:

There are no direct benefits to you for taking part in this study. A benefit would be the contribution to the current scholarship regarding at-risk students staying on track with their credits.

It is hoped that the results of the study may provide some insights into which practices facilitate and sustain student engagement to keep students on track with their credits, as well as which practices impede student engagement that causes students to get off track with their credits and drop out of school.

PROJECT ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY: N/A

CONFIDENTIALITY OF DATA:

Subjects will be assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Data collected via online surveys will be protected by a password-protected computer and a password-protected Google account. Transcripts of the interviews will be stored on a password-protected computer and kept in a locked house.

COSTS AND/OR COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION: None.

CIRCUMSTANCES FOR DISMISSAL FROM THE STUDY:

The participant's decision on whether to participate will not prejudice any future relationships with the University of Findlay. If the participant decides to participate, they are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

COMPENSATION FOR INJURY: None.

CONTACT PERSONS:

For more information concerning this research, please contact Dr. Jon Brasfield at (336) 391-7805. If you believe you may have suffered a research-related injury, contact Dr. Jon Brasfield at (336) 391-7805. If you have further questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact:

IRB Chairperson The University of Findlay Findlay, OH 45840 419 434-4640 irb@findlay.edu

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:

Participation in this study is **voluntary**. You are free to participate or to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason. In the event you decide to withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept confidential.

NEW FINDINGS:

You will be notified of any new information that may change your decision to be included in this study, should any new information become available.

CONSENT:

Federal regulations require precautionary measures to be taken to ensure the protection of human subjects on physical, psychological, social, and other issues. This includes the use of "informed consent" procedures. **Please read carefully.**

I, ______ (PRINTED NAME OF SUBJECT) have been adequately informed regarding the risks and benefits of participating in this study. My signature also indicates that I can change my mind and withdraw my consent to participate at any time without penalty **by contacting the study contact person designated above.** Any questions about my participation in this study have been fully answered.

SUBJECT SIGNATURE

DATE

SUBJECT EMAIL ADDRESS: _____

I have witnessed the consent process and believe the subject has been fully informed, understands the research study, and has agreed to participate in the study.

WITNESS PRINTED NAME:_____

WITNESS SIGNATURE

DATE

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A SIGNED COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP.

Appendix F

Interview Protocols

Focus-Group Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Teachers)

Date:	Start Time:	End Time:
Participants:		
Location:		

Start recording

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I'm excited about this opportunity and I look forward to learning more about the freshman cluster. I am exploring the programmatic structures put in place to support students' transition during their ninth grade. I am interviewing the focus-group today to identify the effectiveness, benefits, and challenges concerning the freshman cluster.

- 1. What does it mean to be a teacher part of the freshman cluster?
- 2. What do you think affects a student's connectivity to school?
- 3. What interventions are in place to help reduce chronic absenteeism?
- 4. What supports are in place to help enhance academic achievement?
- 5. What interventions are in place to prevent student failure in core curriculum subjects?
- 6. How does the school-based team ensure it is holding members accountable for high

quality and regular progress monitoring?

- 7. How is discipline handled?
- 8. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the freshman cluster?
 - a. How would you strengthen the weaknesses?
- 9. How do you receive support in being an effective teacher and member of the freshman cluster?
 - a. Administrative support?

- b. Guidance counselor support?
- c. Colleague support?
- d. Parental support?
- e. Other sources of support?

Conclusion

Thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences with me. If you have any questions, you know how to reach me. My contact information is on the consent form you signed at the informational meeting. Thank you again.

Stop recording

Individual Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Guidance Counselor)

Date:	Start Time:	End Time:
Participant:		
Location:		

Start recording

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I'm excited about this opportunity and I look forward to learning more about the freshman cluster. I am exploring the programmatic structures put in place to support students' transition during their ninth grade. I am interviewing you - counselor to identify the effectiveness, benefits, and challenges concerning the freshman cluster.

- 1. Describe your role as the guidance counselor on the freshman cluster.
- 2. How do you receive support in being an effective guidance counselor on the freshman cluster?
 - a. Teachers?
 - b. Guidance counselor?
 - c. Parents?
 - d. Students?
 - e. Others?

- 3. What do you think affects a student's connectivity to school?
- 4. What interventions are in place to help reduce chronic absenteeism?
- 5. What supports are in place to enhance academic achievement?
- 6. What interventions are in place to prevent student failure in core curriculum subjects?
- 7. How does the school-based team ensure it is holding members accountable for high

quality and regular progress monitoring?

- 8. How is discipline handled?
- 9. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the freshman cluster?
 - a. How would you strengthen the weaknesses?

Conclusion

Thank you for your time and for sharing your experience with me. If you have any questions, you know how to reach me. My contact information is on the consent form you signed at the informational meeting. Thank you again.

Stop recording

Individual Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Administrator)

Date:	Start Time:	End Time:
Participant:		
Location:		
Start recording		

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I'm excited about this opportunity and I look forward to learning more about the freshman cluster. I am exploring the programmatic structures put in place to support students' transition during their ninth grade. I am interviewing you - counselor to identify the effectiveness, benefits, and challenges concerning the freshman cluster.

A TEAMING MODEL EVALUATION

- 1. Describe your role in supporting the freshman cluster teaming model.
- 2. How do you provide support to all the stakeholders associated with the freshman cluster?
 - a. Teachers?
 - b. Guidance counselor?
 - c. Parents?
 - d. Students?
 - e. Others?
- 3. What do you think affects a student's connectivity to school?
- 4. What interventions are in place to help reduce chronic absenteeism?
- 5. What supports are in place to enhance academic achievement?
- 6. What interventions are in place to prevent student failure of core curriculum subjects?
- 7. How does the school-based team ensure it is holding members accountable for high quality and regular progress monitoring?
- 8. How is discipline handled?
- 9. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the freshman cluster?
 - b. How would you strengthen the weaknesses?

Conclusion

Thank you for your time and for sharing your experience with me. If you have any questions, you know how to reach me. My contact information is on the consent form you signed at the informational meeting. Thank you again.

Stop recording

Appendix G

Observation Protocol

Framework for scheduling, organizing, and conducting field observations during the freshman cluster meetings. Observations of the freshman cluster meetings are solely to gather qualitative, observational data related to the processes and activities of the team. The researcher's goal is to collect qualitative descriptive data in the most natural setting.

Purpose: To collect qualitative descriptive data regarding the processes and activities during the freshman cluster meeting.

- **1. Protocol for scheduling observations:** All observation days and times were mutually agreed upon at the informational meeting.
- 2. Freshman cluster rights and expectations: All observational field notes will be kept in the strictest of confidence and will not reveal individual names but the subject matter. Student or parent meetings of a private or sensitive nature will be considered for exclusion of an observance.

Date: _____

Freshman Cluster Content and Structure	Notes
1. Meeting started on time.	
2. Is there an agenda?	
3. Is the agenda sent out prior to the	
meeting?	
4. Did the team follow shared norms?	
5. Did members prepare for the meeting?	
What did the members do?	
Freshman Cluster Relationships and	Notes
Dynamics	
Dialogue and Discussion Dynamics	
1. Are all team members engaged and	
contributing?	
2. Does the team go beyond information	
sharing?	
3. Do team members challenge each	
other?	
4. Do team members ask each other	
about their practices?	

5. Do	team members express differences	
of o	opinions when it is not the	
ma	jority?	
Decision-M	Making Dynamics	
1. Is t	he team focused on commitment or	
agr	reement?	
2. Ho	w does the collective style of the	
tear	m impact problem-solving and	
dec	cision-making?	
3. Do	es the team follow up on decisions?	
4. Are	e actions, tasks to be completed,	
and	d decisions summarized at the end	
of t	the meeting?	
General D	ynamics of the Team	
1. Do	people generally respect each other	
and	l act as colleagues?	
2. Are	e there signs of trust – offering	
hel	p, asking for help, apologizing, and	
bei	ng vulnerable?	
3. Do	the members act like a team? Are	
the	y focused on goals versus	
ind	lividual responsibilities, agendas,	
and	l egos?	
4. Wh	nat team member habits impact	
dise	cussions – laughing, exaggerated	
WO	rds, body language and reactions,	
ran	nbling, too many stories/ examples,	
etc.	.?	
Leader Dy	namics	
What does	the leader do to encourage	
discussion	?	
What does	the leader do to curtail	
conversatio	ons?	

Appendix H

Survey

Instructions:

Please answer the first seven questions based on your demographics. Then on the next 13 questions, please indicate your level of agreement for each of the statements. Information in this survey will be reviewed only by the researcher and the research advisory committee at the University of Findlay. The statements on this survey are designed to help better understand the experiences of the school-based team. Reports based on this survey will not identify specific team members.

Demographic Information

- 1. Indicate the number of years as an educator.
 - a. 1-5 years
 - b. 6-10 years
 - c. 11-15 years
 - d. 16-20 years
 - e. 21-25 years
 - f. 25 years or more
- 2. Indicate the highest education obtained.
 - a. Undergraduate degree
 - b. Undergraduate degree plus graduate-level credits
 - c. Master's degree
 - d. Master's degree plus graduate-level credits
 - e. Terminal degree: Ph.D., Ed.D., J.D., etc.
- 3. Indicate the number of years on the freshman cluster, school-based team.
 - a. Less than one year
 - b. One year
 - c. Two years
 - d. Three years
 - e. Four years
 - f. Five years
 - g. More than five years
- 4. Indicate the core subject you teach.
 - a. English
 - b. Math
 - c. Science
 - d. Social Studies
 - e. Intervention Specialist/Special Education
 - f. Administrator
- 5. Indicate your gender.
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. I choose not to answer.
- 6. Indicate your race.
 - a. Black, Non-Hispanic

- b. White, Non-Hispanic
- c. Hispanic/Latino
- d. Multiracial
- e. Asian or Pacific Islander
- f. I choose not to answer.
- 7. Indicate your age range.
 - a. 21-29
 - b. 30-39
 - c. 40-49
 - d. 50-59
 - e. 60-higher
 - f. I choose not to answer.

School-Based Team Questions

Please select strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree for each question.

- 1. Our team has a meaningful, shared purpose. a. Strongly Agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly Disagree 2. Team members clearly understand their roles. Strongly Agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly Disagree a. 3. Team problem-solving results in effective solutions. a. Strongly Agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly Disagree 4. Decisions made are team-based. a. Strongly Agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly Disagree 5. Team members appreciate one another's unique capabilities. a. Strongly Agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly Disagree 6. We are able to resolve conflicts within the team collaboratively. a. Strongly Agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly Disagree 7. Team members take personal responsibility for the effectiveness of our team. b. Agree c. Disagree a. Strongly Agree d. Strongly Disagree 8. Working on our team inspires people to do their best. a. Strongly Agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly Disagree 9. We have the skills we need to do our jobs effectively. a. Strongly Agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly Disagree 10. Ninth-grade students off-track with their academics were identified early and acted upon with an intervention.
- a. Strongly Agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly Disagree

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- 11. Ninth-grade students in need of extra learning support were provided extra support, such as tutoring, an academic plan, mentoring, etc.
- a. Strongly Agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly Disagree
- 12. The team completed follow-ups on the supports and interventions that are to meet the needs of the ninth-grade students.
- a. Strongly Agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly Disagree
- 13. Ninety percent or more of the students that were identified as at-risk are on-track with their credits.
- a. Strongly Agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly Disagree

Appendix I

Field Observation Notes

Freshman Cluster Content and Structure	Notes
1. Meeting started on time.	Meeting began at 12:27 pm. Five teachers were present at the start of the meeting. Two later joined the meeting. The assistant principal and the counselor were not in attendance.
2. Is there an agenda?	There was no agenda for this meeting. Per the lead teacher, this is an informal meeting because this is the first meeting coming back from break.
3. Is the agenda sent out prior to the meeting?	 Per the lead teacher, normally agendas are sent prior to the scheduled meetings. Reviewed prior agendas posted in the Google Classroom: Below are a few agendas retrieved from the Google Classroom: Agenda: Proactive Presentation Continue with schedule/curriculum for advisory next year Agenda: Proactive / reactive group share out Student Concerns New Business Agenda Continue with convo from Thursday Vision and Mission of academy Where does this take us? Any PD about that?
4. Did the team follow shared norms?	Team followed shared norms. Generally, one person spoke at a time.
5. Did members prepare for the meeting? What did the members do?	After the meeting, the lead teacher shared that this was an informal meeting. This is the first meeting after break. Normally, have an agenda that is shared with the team. The team has a Google Classroom where information is posted and shared. I was invited to join the classroom. I reviewed the Google Classroom. The Google Classroom included past agendas, meeting notes/minutes, student data, various incentives and interventions, presentations, activities for students, etc.

Decision-Making Dynamics		
1. Is the team focused on commitment or agreement?	It appears the team is focused on agreement.	
2. How does the collective style of the team impact problem-solving and decision-making?	From the observation, it appeared the lead teacher utilized the consult method – invite input from others and the consensus method – talk until everyone agrees to one decision.	
3. Does the team follow up on decisions?	After reviewing the Google Classroom created for the Freshman Cluster, there is a post "Just a reminder that we are meeting in our Proactive / Reactive Groups today. Please continue the conversations and plans you were talking about last week and be ready to talk as a big group on Thursday." and another post of an agenda – "1. Discuss how Wednesday went - What worked - What needs to change 2. Discuss / share out convo from solo students 3. Where do we go from here? 4. Talk about the need to address the social/emotional, psychological, and/or physical trauma in the freshmen class - Challenge Day with freshmen? - How would it work? - What does in look like? - Who does it? - Who pays? 5. New Business"	
4. Are actions, tasks to be completed, and decisions summarized at the end of the meeting?	Observed the lead teacher at the end of the meeting state, "To sum up the meeting before taking off, we are going to pull together data, target the average kid, tomorrow talk to 6^{th} hour students about their grades; we will meet on Monday to discuss."	
	General Dynamics of the Team	
1. Do people generally respect each other and act as colleagues?	From the observation, it appeared everyone respected each other and acted as colleagues. The lead teacher invited everyone's input.	
2. Are there signs of trust – offering help, asking for help, apologizing, and being vulnerable?	Yes, a teacher suggested including student voices and offered to coordinate the activity to obtain what the students would like.	
3. Do the members act like a team? Are they focused on goals versus individual responsibilities, agendas, and egos?	The members do act like a team. They are more focused on completing tasks that are aligned with their goals. There has been discussion for a mission and vision statement for the Freshmen Cluster according to a post in the Google Classroom.	
4. What team member habits impact discussions – laughing, exaggerated words, body language and reactions, rambling, too many stories/ examples, etc.?	A few team members more vocal than others, some rambling, and at times off-topic subjects.	

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Leader Dynamics		
1. What does the leader do to encourage discussion?	Observed the leader begin the meeting with an open-ended question and ask for everyone's input. Found the words brainstorming activities on several agendas in the Google Classroom.	
2. What does the leader do to curtail	Observed the teacher leader address the team about getting off track and	
conversations?	discussing staffing, the contract, and scheduling.	