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Supporting Freshmen Through Their First Year Of High School: A Program Review

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SUPPORTING FRESHMEN THROUGH THEIR FIRST YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL:
A PROGRAM REVIEW

By
Rosa Costain

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University
St. Paul, Minnesota
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To my beautiful family, Erik, Oscar and Baby Bloomstrand who make my life endlessly happier. To my amazing and supportive parents, Pam Costain and Larry Weiss, my sister Mattie Weiss and nephew Luca. To the first teacher I ever knew, Grandma Martha. And most of all, to my incredibly talented, smart, funny, caring and passionate students who make me want to be a better teacher and a better person every single day.
“The great thing in this world is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we are moving.”

-Oliver Wendell Holmes
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Change is hard. Even for the most resilient and well-prepared among us. New experiences, transitions and unknown situations can throw us for a loop and challenge our self confidence and sense of self. At the same time, periods of great change provide us with the opportunity to stretch and grow in ways that are both exciting and transformative. Recent educational research has identified several key transition periods students experience that can have profound impacts on their overall attitude and achievement in school. The transitions to kindergarten, middle school, high school and college have all been noted for the unique opportunities and challenges they present for students (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cook & Coley, 2017; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). The challenge for those of us shepherding students through these transitions, especially those of us working with some of the most at risk students, is how to ensure that the transition leaves students feeling optimistic, prepared, cared for and confident.

As the teacher of a ninth grade transition support course, I set out to understand whether those most directly impacted by the course — the students in the class and their core content teachers — felt it was meeting its mission of increasing students’ academic, social/emotional and future planning skills in a safe and supportive environment. I wanted to hear from the students themselves how the class impacted their first year of high school. I also wanted to know what the teachers with whom I share students, felt about the impact of the program. My goal for the research project was to conduct an
evaluation of my transition support class that focused explicitly and directly on the perceptions of the most important stakeholders of the program: students and teachers. I wanted to answer the question, do students and teachers believe the PREP course is an effective high school transition support class?

**Personal Context**

I hated high school. I hated the rules and the cliques and the classes. But I was lucky. I was saved by two teachers who took me under their wing and offered me space and freedom and options. I was also saved by my privilege, a supportive family and the college-going culture in which I grew up. I found ways, specifically study-abroad and post-secondary options in my junior year that allowed me to get out of high school as quickly as possible. Five years later, when the first job I took after college was within the public school system from which I had tried to desperately to escape, the irony was not lost on me.

**Professional Context**

I spent my first seven years as an educator in support roles, first as a special education assistant in a high school classroom for students with specific learning disabilities, then as a member of the schoolwide safety and security team and finally, as a student dean. I would recommend this career path to any would-be teacher. There are some valuable lessons to be learned from interacting with students outside the traditional teacher-student-classroom context.

As a special education assistant I learned humility above all else. I learned just how lucky I had been to be born into the family I was, to have been given the
opportunities I needed, and to have received the emotional, financial and academic help I had received when so many kids, just as deserving as me, had access to so few of those things. I was humbled by the resilience my students showed in the face of difficult circumstances. I also learned how important supportive, caring, engaging teachers were to the learning process. As a member of the safety and security team I learned the importance of building relationships with students, of listening to their voices and validating their stories. In my four years as a dean, tasked with dealing with student behavior and student-teacher relationships, I came to realize the importance of explicit instruction in social/emotional skills and to not assume that high school students had learned the pro-social skills necessary to engage in academic tasks.

As a dean, I was the person students met with when they were removed from class for everything from failure to bring materials, refusal to work, disrespecting staff or any other behavior that resulted in disruption to the learning environment. My approach to working with these students was to process the event from multiple perspectives, to encourage students to accept responsibility for their role in the situation, while acknowledging other's roles and to connect their classroom behavior with their academic performance. I also met regularly with parents and teacher teams to build connections and lines of communication between all stakeholders. While my work was primarily focused on social/emotional skill development, academic achievement was inextricably linked and remained at the forefront of all conversations with students, families and teachers. In fact, the relationship between academic achievement and social/emotional intelligence became more and more clear the longer I worked as a dean. This role was hugely
rewarding, and I loved to see students make progress, make connections between their behavior and their achievement, rebuild relationships and re-engage with their academics. My work was also exceptionally difficult as I was often building the kinds of solid, trusting relationships with students that many teachers struggled to develop, getting stuck between supporting students and supporting teachers, and seeing the same students make poor decisions and fail academically over and over again.

Throughout this time I was working on my teaching license. Just two months after completing my student teaching and earning my teaching license, my principal asked me to help develop, and then teach, in a new program the district was creating to more effectively support and assist students as they transition from middle school to high school. I was excited for the opportunity to utilize the instructional and curricular skills I had learned in graduate school, along with my skills in teaching and affirming social emotional, pro-social, pro-school skills.

**PREP Program Overview**

The district I work for, one of the largest public school districts in my Midwestern state, has worked for years to develop and implement strategies and programs to address the huge gaps in achievement and opportunity that exist between white students and students of color. The PREP program, as it became known, was developed with these gaps in mind. The district already had a successful and well-established AVID program in place in middle and high schools across the district. But administrators noticed there was a population of students who, for a variety of reasons, were not able to access programs like AVID. These were students whose attendance, grades, or behavior was
preventing them from fully engaging with school. Some students who would eventually be enrolled in the PREP program were extremely motivated and hard working but had low reading scores year after year. Others had been identified as advanced learners when they were younger but had spent years underperforming, acting out and falling behind. Still others struggled with mental health issues or had difficult family situations and had missed considerable amounts of school. While students who enrolled in the PREP program had diverse needs and educational histories, all had underperformed in middle school and had been identified as needing additional assistance in order to persist to graduation.

In the summer before the 2014-2015 school year, I worked with two other PREP teachers, a PREP counselor and our district program coordinator to collaboratively develop a curriculum map for the new PREP elective course that would offered in the upcoming school year based on research, data and our collective experience.

We decided to focus the course on five overarching goals: 1) Academic Strategies and Behaviors, 2) Identity, 3) Literacy, 4) Speaking & Listening and 5) Social/Emotional skill development. Students in our classes would investigate their own beliefs about themselves as learners, their beliefs about education, practice specific speaking, listening, reading and writing strategies, develop the ability to persist through challenges and maintain motivation to pursue long term goals. In addition to this curriculum, PREP students have access to a counselor dedicated to the program and highly trained tutors who work with students to talk through their learning and complete work from their six other courses. Tutors are available to students twice a week and the PREP counselor
works with students once a week. Class time is also devoted to checking grades and academic progress, contacting teachers with questions, reviewing transcripts, reflecting on academic progress and goal setting.

While a good portion of class time is devoted to supporting student success in their other classes, two days a week are also devoted to the PREP curriculum. On these days, we focus on developing social/emotional skills while simultaneously practicing academic skills. For example, students may engage in a close reading on how the brain learns, engage in a Socratic Seminar around the best ways to learn and then research and write a persuasive essay on how to improve education. Students also explore their strengths in and outside the classroom and learn about career paths they may want to pursue. Additionally PREP students engage in circle discussions exploring values and experiences, reflect on their history as a learner and create goals to increase their own resilience and ability to manage challenges. This combination of academic and social/emotional skill development helps students remain engaged in their coursework while also planning for challenges and practicing how to persevere in the face of those challenges.

Rationale for Inquiry

I believe in this course, this curriculum and our mission to support struggling students and equip them with necessary skills. I strongly believe in the importance of teaching social/emotional life skills students may not have been explicitly taught elsewhere. I believe in holding high expectations, providing engaging, high-interest and fun content alongside purposeful academic support, and I believe that PREP is an
important course for many of our students. I also believe in data and using data strategically to identify strengths and gaps in our educational programs.

Not only do I believe in this course, but in the three years I have been teaching it, I have seen students’ reading and writing skills improve dramatically over the course of the school year. I have been told by other teachers and support staff about the progress they have witnessed from students enrolled in PREP, and most importantly, I have seen students’ confidence rise. I have had students tell me that they never quite saw themselves as a college-bound student until they learned about their career and college interests and visited college campuses. I have had students reflect on the changes they have noticed in themselves in terms of their academic abilities as well as their own perception of themselves as students, learners and leaders. My hope in completing this capstone is to highlight the voices of the students and teachers affected by the program and use their experiences and opinions to inform myself, my district and anyone else concerned with high school transition support about the impact such programs may have on students.

With these beliefs in mind, the purpose of my capstone inquiry is multi-faceted. First, I want to understand students’ own perceptions of the PREP course and its effect on their educational outlook. I want to know whether and to what extent students believe the PREP class equips them with the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in high school. Next, I am interested in the perception ninth grade content teachers have about the class, and whether, and to what extent, other teachers believe PREP supports their instruction and the students we share. Specifically, I want to investigate how the people
impacted by the course feel about it. Frequently, program or course evaluations rely solely on quantitative data, such as grades and attendance, and while there is merit in looking at the hard data, I want to investigate the impact of the program from the perspective of the most important stakeholders.

The PREP program, that we designed and implemented includes 4 teachers at 4 different school sites, as well as the dedicated PREP counselor, and our District Program Facilitator, who are all involved in the work of sustaining our transition support program. While an evaluation of the entire program would have been beneficial and provided extremely valuable information, this project focused solely on my school site and the students and teachers impacted by the PREP courses I teach.

**Purpose and Point of View**

The question my capstone will attempt to answer is, do students and teachers perceive the PREP program to be effective in meeting the goals of a high school transition program?

In many large urban districts, educational initiatives come and go at a disheartening rate. Promising practices and programs are underfunded and abandoned with increasing frequency while the racial achievement gap continues with stubborn persistency. Our public school system simply does not work for all students. Too many teachers, especially at the high school level, are far too concerned with content and not sufficiently concerned with the specific students sitting in front of them. Too many teachers are willing to dismiss or disregard those students who do not engage in socially acceptable ways (Torff, 2011). Too much of students’ school days are taken up with
teachers talking at, rather than with, them (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991). Too much of students’ school days are taken up with content to which students feel no personal connection (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). Teachers and schools must be willing to try new strategies, new programs and new approaches to reaching chronically underachieving students if we are to really address our gaps. I believe PREP offers one such solution. It is a program that builds on students skills and engages them in their own learning, a program that utilizes student voice and student interests, holds students accountable for their actions and decisions by teaching them new skills to communicate and advocate for their needs, and recognizes students’ humanity while also holding high academic standards.

If we are to have any impact on the achievement gaps that plague our education system, I believe we must get serious about teaching students skills and knowledge that extends beyond particular, specialized content areas. We must develop strategies to connect with the hard-to-reach students and instill in them a sense of belonging, promise and potential.

Transition support classes, such as PREP, offer opportunities to narrow the achievement gap by supporting students as well as teachers. Students are supported through innovative and engaging curriculum and instruction on pro-social skills while content teachers are supported when students are better equipped to engage in learning because their academic and social emotional skills are being developed. As Oakes and Waite (2009) stated, “when supports for time management, social skills, and maintaining
an academic focus are provided, students experience an easier transition and are more likely to have success in ninth grade and beyond” (p. 2).

Although it is too early to tell if the PREP program has increased graduation rates, this data will be available in a few years. Other districts, notably Chicago Public Schools, have already seen increased graduation rates with the implementation of support systems and targeted data collection (Allensworth & Easton, 2005).

**Conclusion**

Chapter One provides the context and rationale for my research as well as preliminary background information on the program to be reviewed. Chapter Two provides a literature review of the historical and current research related to freshman transition programs and best practices. Chapter Three describes the research study including methods, data and participants. Chapter Four discusses the findings of the program review research project. Chapter Five contains a reflection on what was learned through my research and the implication of this research study for the PREP program and other freshman transition programs.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The research question my project seeks to answer is, do students and teachers perceive the PREP program to be effective in meeting the goals of a high school transition program? In order to answer this question it is necessary to first understand the context within which the program is operating, the history of high school transition supports in general, what the research says about what makes a successful program and what the essential components of a transition course are.

This literature review explores four main themes: 1) the need for transition support programs, 2) expert recommendations for transition programs  3) best practices in transition courses, and 4) current program and course models in use, in order to trace the origins of such programs, describe best practices in terms of structure and curriculum and take stock of the current models being used across the country.

The Need for Transition Support

The personal and societal effects of not graduating high school have been well documented in educational literature for decades. More recently, however, researchers have been examining the relationship between effective transitions to ninth grade and successfully graduating high school, trying to identify which students in particular fail to graduate high school, why they drop out, and where in their educational journey they make the decision to leave school. The following section deals with some of the research
conclusions about the connection between successful high school transition and high graduation rates.

**Dropout Crisis**

High school graduation has long been seen as a necessity for all young people in the United States but has been highlighted as particularly critical for students of color and students who come from low-income backgrounds (Swanson, 2014). Although high school graduation rates have been rising for the past few decades, nearly twenty percent of students nationally still do not earn a high school diploma within four years (Stetser, 2014; Swanson, 2014). The failure to graduate on time is most alarming for African-American and Latino students. In some large urban districts, as many as fifty percent of students do not graduate high school (Neild, 2009). Even more alarming, nearly one third of high school dropouts leave school before the tenth grade (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999). Indeed in 2009, Cohen and Smerdon bluntly stated “Secondary schools are hemorrhaging adolescents at an alarming rate, with the greatest loss during and immediately following the first year of high school” (p. 117). One study found that in Philadelphia, 80% of ninth graders who were not promoted to tenth grade failed to graduate high school at all (Neild, Stoner-Eby & Furstenberg, 2008). Conversely, a study by the Chicago Consortium on School Research found that 81% of students who were on-track to graduate at the end of ninth grade graduated from high school within four years (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Clearly ninth grade success or failure has enormous consequences for students and society at large.
The economic and social costs of dropping out of high school have been well documented. The Alliance for Excellent Education and the United States Department of Education estimated in 2011 that high school graduates earn an average of $8,000 more annually than do high school dropouts, or a half a million dollars more over the course of a lifetime (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Moreover, high school dropouts are more likely to be underemployed or unemployed, be involved in the criminal justice system, and have higher rates of tobacco and drug use (Neild, Stoner-Eby & Furstenberg, 2008).

The reasons students drop out of high school are as diverse as the students themselves, but researchers have pointed to a few indicators related to the transition to high school that may predict which students will not persist to graduation. These indicators include the interplay of adolescent development and a new school environment, students entering high school academically unprepared and failing to catch up, achievement loss associated with school transitions and the effects of moving to a new, larger school with less oversight and support than occurs for many students entering high school (Oakes & Waite, 2009). These possible risk factors are not exhaustive, and many researchers have pointed to other indicators including mental health, gender, and family organization (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). However, the risk factors noted here may have particular relevance to the discussion around high school transitions and the importance of supporting students during this critical period.
Research and findings about On-Track Indicators will also be offered in this section, highlighting some of the strategies schools and districts are employing to identify and target students at-risk of not graduating.

**Adolescent development.** The transition to high school is often accompanied by a variety of physical, mental and emotional changes in teenagers (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). At precisely the time students move from, what is often a smaller school with more structure and support, into a larger school with less oversight and more options, their brains and bodies are also changing dramatically (Elias, 2001). Although most students have gone through puberty by the time they reach high school, many are still dealing with the effects of those physical changes, becoming more aware of their sexuality and their relationships with members of their own and the opposite sex (Potter et al., 2001). While brain development increases adolescents’ ability to think abstractly, make generalizations and think more critically than ever before, young people's sense of identity is becoming more concrete, peer relationships become ever more important and students’ own value systems develop and are solidified (Potter et al., 2001). Even for the most well-adjusted adolescent, this period of physical, mental and emotional transition can be difficult and confusing.

When these changes are experienced in the context of a move to a new school, it is no wonder so many students struggle academically and emotionally their first year of high school. For all these reasons, Neild (2009) argued, “entering ninth grade, then, may be thought of as a transition to a new stage in the life course as much as a transition to a new school” (p. 54). Neild (2009) cautioned, however, against concluding that
developmental changes alone can account for all the academic losses and eventual
dropouts that occur in the transition to high school. She also noted that not all teenagers
are negatively impacted by these developmental changes and there are many other factors
that may account for dropout rates.

**Academic under preparation.** Many students enter high school underprepared
for the rigorous curriculum demands and the increase in homework, assessments and
other assignments (Neild, Belfanz & Herzog, 2007). Some students are underprepared as
a result of a long history of underachievement in school that is only exacerbated by the
high demands of high school-level work. Other students simply have not yet developed
the skills needed to keep up with the workload, despite having achieved at acceptable
levels in elementary and middle school. Still others lack the “academic independence”
skills needed to accomplish tasks like setting aside time for homework, asking for help
from teachers or finding additional resources when they get stuck (Neild, 2009).

As Potter et al. (2001) noted, adolescents develop at different rates and students
who are do not develop as quickly as their peers may become frustrated with the new
demands placed on them in the transition to high school. Neild, Belfanz and Herzog
(2007) argued that students who receive an F in math or English during eighth grade may
be considered at-risk of not graduating high school.

Mizelle, a middle grades education coordinator at Georgia College, found in 1995
that even students who entered high school with high levels of confidence and support
agreed that they would have been more ready for high school if their middle schools had
provided a more challenging and rigorous curriculum to prepare them for high school.
Mizelle also found students wished they had learned more strategies for independent learning during their middle school years (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Similarly, Cauley and Jovanovich noted that students believe they are academically unprepared for high school and wish they had learned better strategies for taking charge of their own learning (2006).

Transitions and achievement loss. Alspaugh (1998) found that most students experienced some achievement loss in the transition from middle school to high school but that students who moved from a 6-8 middle school, rather than a K-8 elementary school, experienced greater achievement losses as they transitioned into high school. For the many students who make several school moves over the course of their lifetime due to high mobility or housing instability, the consequences may be even more severe as each school change is accompanied by some achievement loss (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

Research conducted by the Chicago Consortium on School Research in 2014 found that on average a student’s grades dropped by about a half a letter grade between eighth and ninth grade across all content areas and among all student populations simply in the transition to high school (Rosenkranz, de la Torre, Steven & Allensworth, 2014). The study also found that only 10% of students improved their GPA from eighth to ninth grade. Said another way, in the transition to high school nearly all students’ GPAs stayed the same or got worse. Unexcused absences also increased significantly during this transition. Research by Rosenkranz et al. (2014) in the Chicago Public Schools found that ninth graders missed an average of twenty seven days of school.
New schools and new contexts. For most students, the transition to high school means a physical move to a larger, more departmentalized school facility where teachers are often organized by content speciality rather than by grade level. This move can be especially difficult for students who are socially or academically underprepared for this new experience (Legters & Kerr, 2001).

Several researchers point out that high school staff often believe students are more prepared for the transition than they actually are and therefore provide far less support for ninth graders than they received in middle school (Benner & Graham, 2009; Eccles et al., 1991). In turn, ninth graders often misinterpret this lack of oversight to mean that attendance and grades are a matter of choice, rather than a requirement. Research also shows that ninth graders have poorer attendance in ninth grade than they did in eighth grade and are more likely to fail classes in ninth grade compared to middle school (Benner & Graham, 2009; Eccles et al., 1991).

Although the possible reasons for students dropping out described above are not exhaustive, they do represent some of the common themes that emerge from the literature. The remainder of this section will deal with data systems that have been developed in recent years to identify students most at risk of dropping out of high school.

On-Track Indicators

Over the past twenty years, researchers at the Chicago Consortium on School Research (CCSR) have been studying the freshman transition and its role in the dropout crisis, because as Williamston noted in 2010, “the single most predictive indicator of high school dropout is the student's academic standing during the ninth grade” (Williamston,
2010, p. 1). In the 1990s they began developing a tool to evaluate students’ progress during ninth grade to predict students’ likelihood of on-time high school graduation. The On-Track Indicator Data System relies on two specific data points to determine whether students are on track towards graduation: credits earned and total number of Fs earned in core classes. They chose these variables from several predictive measurements because combined, they provide the most accurate picture of a student's progress towards graduation (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). They further explained that the On-Track indicators are a more effective method of predicting eventual high school dropouts than are eighth grade test scores or grades.

Schools in Chicago have been using the On-Track Indicator for several years now to identify students who may be at risk of not graduating. They identify students as being on track if they have earned enough credits to be promoted to tenth grade and have no more than one semester F in a core class such as English, math, social studies or science (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Chicago Public Schools is not the only school district that is using this tool; many school districts across the country are now using some type of ninth grade on-track indicator to identify at-risk students. This tool has been adopted by Minneapolis Public Schools, and St. Paul Public Schools is planning to use it in the future (Tedmon, 2016).

The creators of the On-Track indicator data system acknowledge some of the limitations of their measurements including the possibility that the thresholds for determining if a student is on or off track may be too low. For example, students in Chicago Public Schools are considered “on track” if they earn five credits their freshman
year even though six credits is the minimum required to graduate on time without remediation. In addition, the On-Track indicators do not provide educators information on whether students are prepared for rigorous high school or college classes (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Most importantly, while On-Track indicators provide important information about which students may be at-risk of not graduating, they are a data tool, not an intervention program. They are an important tool for educators interested in identifying and intervening with struggling students. As Roybal et al. (2014) argued, “educators cannot wait for students to fail; proactive interventions at multiple levels are necessary” (p. 480).

Over the past two decades, educational researchers have come to consensus that successful ninth grade transitions predict eventual high school graduation and that strong transition support programs are important to ensure more students are on track to graduate. In this next section, I will outline some of the most common programmatic recommendations researchers and practitioners have put forth for building a high school transition program.

**Expert Recommendations for Transition Programs**

As our understanding of the importance of transition supports for students entering high school has expanded over the past several decades, many experts have begun to make recommendations about the focus and necessary activities of such programs. First and foremost, researchers argue that educators must understand that “transition is a process not a single event, that unfolds over time…” (Ellerbrock, Denmon, Owens & Lindstrom, 2015, p. 174). Morgan and Hertzog (2001) urged schools
to develop programs that include activities that begin in eighth grade and continue throughout ninth grade.

Expert recommendations for transition support programs often include creating more effective communication and collaboration systems between and among stakeholders as well as improved school structures and systems. Effective communication and collaboration includes strengthening communication between middle and high school staff, and with families and students. School structures and systems recommendations encompass issues such as scheduling, staffing, class size, space and community. This section explores expert recommendations for developing and sustaining effective transition support programs in high schools.

**Communication and Collaboration**

Two recommendations were offered in the research to improve communication and collaboration during the transition process. First, experts recommend developing more effective lines of communication with families in order to increase understanding of the transition process (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Additionally, improving communication and collaboration between middle and high school staff is recommended to ensure that all parties are aware of the steps, skills and activities associated with the transition to high school (Bottoms, 2008; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Williamston, 2010).

**Families and students.** Researchers have concluded that educators should involve both students and parents in the transition process as they often cite similar concerns, including confusion about academic requirements, school rules and
expectations and peer relationships (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

Researchers Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) took it a step further, stating that parents and students should be involved in all aspects of planning transition programs alongside middle and high school teachers, counselors and administrators.

Other researchers encourage schools to invite families to engage in transition activities like touring the school, scheduling, meeting counselors, connecting families to current high school students, inviting parents into the school to see what their children are learning and involving them in students’ goal setting and career exploration (Bottoms, 2008). For eighth grade students, Morgan and Hertzog (2001) recommended high school tours, panel discussions with high school students, and small group orientations. Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) echoed these recommendations and suggested middle and high schools should partner to ensure that eighth grade students and their families visit their new high school and orient themselves to the space before they begin ninth grade.

**School staff.** Researchers recommend forming teams of teachers from middle and high school to work together to better align standards, discuss curriculum and identify key skills and knowledge students will need to develop in order to create a more seamless transition between middle and high school (Bottoms, 2008; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Williamston, 2010). As Mizelle and Irvin (2000) noted, activities that create a mutual understanding of curriculum requirements at both levels and of the young adolescent learner will enable middle school educators to do a better job of preparing students for high school and will help educators at
both levels develop a high school transition program to meet the particular needs of their students. (p. 59)

They further argued that the responsibility for designing effective transition programs should not fall solely on middle or high school educators, but rather should include both parties along with families and students.

**Structures and Systems**

Several recommendations are offered about how schools can accommodate transition programs. These include 1) flexible or block scheduling, 2) recruiting and placing the highly effective and enthusiastic teachers in transition programs, and 3) committing to small class sizes and low teacher-student ratios in the ninth grade. Some experts even recommend creating a separate space for ninth grade students within the school building.

**Block schedules.** Roybal, Thornton and Usinger (2014) recommended schools implement block schedules for ninth grade students to allow them more time to learn important concepts and to accommodate doubling up on core classes such as math and English. Many of the programs described by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) (2002) have implemented block scheduling as a means to increase student engagement in deep learning and to accommodate double doses of core content. Legters and Kerr (2001) noted that extended periods are one of several expert recommendations for effective transition programs.

**Staffing.** Students making the transition to high school need teachers who are especially caring, but who also hold them to high standards of achievement. Bottoms
(2008) concluded that for a growing number of students, the intrinsic motivation to remain engaged during the high school transition cannot be sustained without strong teacher support. For this reason, the very best teachers should be assigned to ninth grade transition courses. Dedmond (2008) from George Washington University’s Freshman Transition Initiative reminded us that although it may seem intuitive or obvious to place the best teachers with ninth grade students, freshmen are often taught by the least experienced teachers in the building. She further argued that in order for freshman transition courses to be successful, teachers need to be fully committed to the goals of the program, motivated to teach the curriculum, innovative and willing to work as part of a team. Dedmond and The Freshman Transition Initiative (2008) suggested creating a team of staff committed to the goals of the program and providing professional development for all involved. In addition to block scheduling, several researchers also recommended structuring teaching schedules so that those involved have a common planning period to meet and discuss concerns, make plans and build community amongst the staff involved (Bottoms, 2008; Dedmond, 2008).

**Small learning communities.** A variety of researchers have concluded that students in ninth grade should be organized into small learning communities or freshman “houses” to encourage community and a sense of belonging and to increase engagement (Bottoms, 2008; SREB, 2002). However, there is still some disagreements as to how students should be organized within these small learning communities. Bottoms (2008), for example, argued that no small learning community should be entirely composed of at-risk students. However, Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) recommended schools focus
their efforts on low-achieving students, or students with behavior concerns, especially if their schools are located in unsafe neighborhoods and students have experienced violence or trauma and therefore may need additional supports to deal with concerns that affect school performance.

**Tutoring/extra work time.** As students transition into high school, many may be surprised by the rigor of their courses or the workload demands. It is important to provide students with the space and time to receive tutoring or support to keep up with the academic demands. Bottoms (2008) recommended building a study period into the scheduled school day. Others have suggested creating a mandatory after school study hour for struggling students as identified by their teachers (SREB, 2002).

**Positive relationships and a sense of community.** Students’ relationships often change or are disrupted in the transition to high school. Effective transition programs account for these changes and allow students to develop new positive peer relationships (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Mizelle and Irvin (2000) explained that effective transition programs must include opportunities for new students to get to know each other and develop strong relationships with their peers. Beland (2007) reminded us that a strong sense of community increases academic motivation and persistence and leads to increased academic outcomes.

A sense of community and a focus on positive relationships should include both student-to-student and student-to-teacher relationships. Students who believe their teachers care about them personally are more likely to feel connected to school, follow school norms and rules and make an effort to achieve in all their classes (Beland, 2007).
This supports earlier assertions that recruiting and selecting the right teachers for transition programs is so important. 

Roybal et al. (2014) explained there is a relationship between feeling connected to school and achieving academic success. Students who feel connected to school are more likely to be academically successful. A longitudinal study conducted with over 100,000 students in 188 schools showed that school connectedness was more important to academic achievement than was socioeconomic status (Bland, Felner, Shim Seitsinger & Dumas, 2003 as cited in Roybal et al., 2014). Further findings suggested that students of color are most positively impacted by school programs that foster a sense of school connectedness (Becker & Luthar, 2002). Because students of color are often the most likely to drop out of school, a strong sense of community and positive school relationships are of utmost importance for them.

**Best Practices in Transition Courses**

Roeser, Eccles and Sameroff (2000) argued that at the most basic level adolescents need to feel safe and secure in order to learn well,

That is, adolescents’ decisions to engage in learning or not in the classroom depend in some measure on whether they feel able to meet the challenges presented them, whether they see purpose and value in classroom activities, and whether they feel safe and cared for by others in the setting. (p. 454)

While Roeser et al. (2000) referred to teenagers generally, these needs are even more pronounced in students who are at-risk of not graduating, have underperformed in school, and/or have a history of behavior issues or attendance concerns. For these reasons
effective transition programs must allow students opportunities to be successful academically and socially and engage in challenging, real-world activities. Bottoms (2008) and Dedmond (2008) both argued that transition curriculum should focus on essential academic skills like writing and math, career and college exploration, and study skills like goal setting and note-taking, while also supporting students to develop important social skills like problem solving, managing emotions and building positive peer relationships. Experts also agreed that transition curriculum should be challenging and allow students to grapple with high-interest real world issues (Elias, 2001; SREB, 2002). This section deals with the essential curricular components of effective transition courses including a focus on college and career readiness, and the development of academic and social/emotional skills.

**College/Career Readiness**

At-risk and struggling students who envision themselves in college and careers are more likely to maintain motivation during the high school years. Dedmond recommended students begin to plan for their “decade of transition” (2008, p. 16) by exploring career pathways and the education required to pursue different careers and by setting short and long term goals to help them achieve their ten year plan. The Freshman Transition Initiative’s “Standards for a Freshman Transition Course” (2004) recommended students investigate their own interests and values, research career paths and create a “personal career portfolio” of careers they would like to pursue (p. 3). Dedmond (2008) reminded us, however, that college and career planning is not the only
component of a transition program that is needed. Students need to develop other life
skills in order to be successful in enacting their ten year career plan.

**Academic Skills and Strategies**

Many students enter high school underprepared for the heavy workload and the
personal motivation necessary to be successful in rigorous courses. Students may not
have had instruction in note-taking, test taking strategies or time management. Roybal et
al. (2014) suggested schools should include explicit instruction in these and other
achievement strategies in a ninth grade curriculum.

The Freshman Transition Initiative’s Standards for Freshman Transition Courses
(2004) includes standards around giving and receiving feedback, and “applying reading,
writing, listening, speaking and mathematics skills in family and workplace settings” (p.
5), illustrating that academic skills allow students to be competent in other areas of their
lives. The program models outlined by the Southern Regional Education Board (2002)
contained numerous examples of programs that explicitly teach students how to take
notes, study for and take tests and organize their work and schedules.

Various other publications highlighted the importance of teaching students to set,
monitor and achieve goals (Dedmond, 2008; Hoyt et al., 2004; SREB, 2002). Goal setting
is not a one time activity; it is an ongoing process that students should engage in on a
regular basis. Students should frequently revise, update and review their goals in order to
maintain momentum and motivation (Dedmond, 2008). Goal setting is also not a strictly
academic skill. Effective transition programs encourage students to set and monitor both
academic and self-management goals.
Social/Emotional Skills

As educators have come to understand the importance of supporting students through the critical stage that is high school transition, they were also becoming more receptive to the need for direct instruction on skills such as emotional management, conflict resolution and creative problem solving. In fact, transition support courses are an especially effective way to teach these skills alongside more traditional academic skills.

Beland (2007) wrote that social emotional skills encompass the “ability to recognize and manage emotions, form positive relationships, solve problems, become motivated to accomplish a goal, make responsible decisions and avoid risky behavior” (p. 69). Elias (2001), an author and psychology professor, put it is slightly different terms, saying students need to develop what he called the A, B, and 3Cs of emotional intelligence. He argued students who can show appreciation, feel a sense of belonging, have confidence in their competencies and contributions are more likely to persist to graduation he argued. Furthermore, he stated that as students transition to high school, schools should focus less on concrete skills and more on helping students build and integrate the skills of emotional intelligence and competence (Elias, 2001).

At a time when high schools are both extremely departmentalized and content heavy, this may seem like a radical shift in philosophy, but as Beland (2007) stated “Employers have made it abundantly clear that they now expect from high school graduates a level of social and emotional competency as high as—if not higher than—the level of an technical skill” (p. 69).
Effective transition programs should include lessons and activities centered on understanding multiple perspectives, empathy, self-awareness and emotional management and building positive relationships with peers and adults.

**Current Programming and Course Models**

As recently as 1999, Hertzog and Morgan lamented that high school transition programs were “all but nonexistent” (p. 94). In the intervening two decades, school districts across the country have begun implementing a variety of different transition support programs for students moving out of middle school and into high school, based on many of the recommendations stated above (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002).

Transition supports for students entering ninth grade usually include one or all of the following: intensive full year programs, semester or year-long courses or supplementary activities. Supplementary activities are defined as short, one-time offerings at the middle or high school level that allow students to become more comfortable with their new environments. These include freshman orientation nights and school tours. Transition courses are classes offered either to targeted groups or entire ninth grade classes, that are meant to ease the transition to high school and develop important skills. These courses are often based on the curricular goals described above. Transition programs include more intensive support that involve significant changes to the structure of ninth grade on a school-wide level. This might include elements such as block scheduling, small learning communities or ninth grade academies. Examples of all three transition support offerings will be described below.
Eighth and Ninth Grade Programs

There is a significant amount of literature on how middle schools and high schools ought to work together to plan transition programs that span eighth and ninth grade. Some examples of suggested activities for this type of program include collaborative planning between middle and high school teachers, targeted programs for academically underprepared students and rigorous curriculum at the middle school level to better prepare students for high school courses. Below are two examples of programs that occur across the middle and high school level.

The Crossing the Road program in Rockcastle County School District in Kentucky includes activities for all incoming freshman during their eighth grade year, as well as specific summer programming for the most academically at-risk students entering ninth grade (SREB, 2002). All eighth grade students participate in a registration night at the high school in the spring and are able to meet counselors, advisors and administration at their new school. In addition, all eighth graders have the opportunity to shadow a ninth grade student for a day to get an idea of the high school experience. Students also participate in an orientation day where they are able to review schedules, rules and graduation requirements along with their families. Students who have been identified as most at-risk of dropping out also participate in a summer bridge program at the high school that focuses on important academic skills like time management and study skills (SREB, 2002).

Oakes (2009) described a program in Maryland where teachers from the middle and high school meet bi-monthly to share instruction strategies, align curriculum and
look at student data as a team. The schools have also developed an ideal high school graduate profile that is well-known and discussed in both middle and high school. Finally, all students create a high school plan while in middle school, that becomes a part of their permanent record and is shared with families and counselors who will be registering them for classes. According to Oakes, the high school reports over 80% of its students attend some type of post-secondary institution (2009).

**Programs for All Ninth Grade Students**

Some schools opt for transition programs that include the entire ninth grade student body. These programs may have a smaller, more targeted program for certain students, but include many activities designed for all ninth grade students. Several examples of whole class transition programs are highlighted below.

Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School in South Carolina implemented a full ninth grade program in 1996 that has led to increases in math and writing scores on state tests. The Freshmen Academy was designed with four goals in mind: challenge, community, commitment and careers. All ninth grade students participate in the Freshman Academy, which includes a rigorous curriculum including double periods of English and math, all within a supportive and nurturing community. The Freshman Academy is located in common space that allows students and teachers to get to know each other better and to experience a sense of belonging as students begin high school. The Academy also has a strong focus on career exploration that spans the entire year, and it encourages students to make a career plan before leaving ninth grade (SREB, 2002).
At South Grand Prairie High School in Grand Prairie, Texas, all freshmen take a twelve week course their first semester, called Keystone. The Keystone course includes an extensive orientation program to introduce students to high school expectations and staff. Next, students spend six weeks learning important school skills like goal setting and time management and hear from guest speakers about their own pathways to success. Finally, students engage in a three week career exploration project and make plans to achieve their own career goals. Between 1997 and 2000, South Prairie High School saw more students passing tenth grade state math tests and many more students taking Advanced Placement exams than ever before (SREB, 2002).

In Victorville, California, ninth grade students enroll in Success 101 to explore career choices and learn important skills like organization and time management. Just two years into implementation, suspensions among ninth graders had decreased and more students are enrolling in rigorous courses (Dedmond, 2008).

Programs for Targeted Ninth Grade Populations

While whole grade transition programs offer one model for transition support, other school choose to target and support specific students who have been identified as “at-risk”. Often these programs focus on developing academic skills and planning for success in high school and beyond. These programs may be less intensive and time consuming for schools to implement.

Schools using on-track indicators or other data to identify and target at-risk students have developed several programs of note (SREB, 2002). The Student Support Assistance Program (SSAP) in Englewood, Florida, identifies students based on data on
middle school grades, attendance, behavior and test scores. They place at-risk students in a cohort with smaller classes, a block schedule, reading and math transition courses and a team of teachers. The teachers have a common planning time to discuss specific student concerns and plan for interventions. A counselor dedicated to the SSAP program helps students and their families develop plans and follows up with families when students are absent or off track (SREB, 2002).

In Chesterfield County, Virginia, school officials developed a year long sociology course for at-risk students that includes a special emphasis on school skills like study habits and organization. In addition, social skills like conflict resolution, self-discipline and anger management are embedded into the traditional curriculum. Students who complete the sociology course in ninth grade also take a course in tenth grade focusing on more sophisticated study skills and service to the community (as cited in Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006).

At Henry County High School in rural Kentucky, at-risk students are recruited to participate in a special Freshman Academy specifically designed for students who graduated from eighth grade with a history of low academic achievement, behavior issues or low attendance. Students take classes in a block schedule and must earn their way into the regular high school by passing three of their four core classes the first semester. Students who fail to pass their classes remain in the program for the full school year. Teachers in the program focus on developing high school skills by providing students with engaging, hands-on learning experiences within a small supportive community. Teachers communicate frequently with parents and work to involve them in their child’s
education. Henry County High School found that most students who participated in the Freshman Academy were able to perform comparable to their peers after completing the program. Many continued to pass classes and remain on track for the remainder of their high school career (SREB, 2002).

While transition supports can take many different forms, the literature offers both programmatic and curricular recommendations for ensuring that students are supported as they move into high school. As more schools work to develop their own transition supports, they can draw on the experience and expertise of educators and schools who have already begun this work.

Additional Program Models

The programs discussed above are not an exhaustive list of the transition support services offered across the nation. The types of programs in place are varied in terms of levels of support offered, curriculum used, student population targeted and staff involved. Below are a few more examples of transition support programs that were highlighted in my review of the available literature.

Officials in Florida implemented a counselor-led program titled Student Success Skills in grades five, six, eight and nine that incorporates some of the transition support criteria suggested in the previous section. The curriculum is designed to teach students cognitive skills like goal setting and planning, social skills like listening and teamwork, and self-management skills such as motivation, persistence and managing emotions. Program assessors note that social emotional skill building has positive academic outcomes as well (Brigman, Webb & Campbell, 2007).
Although the literature does not provide many examples of eighth grade only transition programs, a study conducted by Mizelle in 1995 compared two groups of students in eighth and ninth grade and found that students who had been involved in an intensive program that included looped teachers from sixth through eighth grade, and hands-on and cooperative learning opportunities were more likely to be prepared for high school, feel confident in the transition and enroll in higher level high school classes than their peers who had a more traditional middle school experience (as cited in Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). A report by Oakes and Waite (2009) also described a middle school in Maryland that works throughout student's eighth grade year, to prepare them for high school in general, and to provide information and resources about the three high schools students in attend specifically. School staff have information sessions for students and their families, screen movies about the transition to high school and hold sharing sessions with former students about their experience.

One ambitious project enacted in seven school districts across the country attempted to create a transition program that spanned from kindergarten through high school graduation by overhauling curricula and ensuring that standards were aligned from one grade to the next, partnering with vocational programs and higher education institutions and restructuring assessments and feedback (Weldy, 1991).

While it seems clear that experts agree on the importance of supporting students as they transition to high school, it is clear there are a variety of program models and courses being implemented across the country. It remains to be seen if one particular
model will emerge as the most effective transition program for supporting students as they move from middle into high school.

**Conclusion**

This literature review began with a summary of the research on some of the issues associated with the transition to high school and how they relate to the dropout crisis. I also discussed On Track data systems and how they are being used to identify struggling students. Next, I identified features of effective transition programs, including small class sizes, flexible scheduling, academic support and collaboration amongst stakeholders. Best practices within support courses were also identified and included a focus on academic, social/emotional and future planning skills within a supportive community. Finally, a variety of program examples from around the country were offered in order to show the different ways schools and districts are working to support their students.

Chapter three outlines my research methods and questions and provide an overview of data collection, participants and research questions in more depth.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This program review research was designed to answer the question, based on the
best practices, do students and teachers perceive the PREP program to be effective in
meeting the goals of a high school transition program?

In order to answer this question I utilized surveys and interviews, with both
students and teachers, to gain an in-depth understanding of how these major stakeholders
felt about the program and the progress that students are making due to the course.
Chapter Three outlines my research rationale, the participants involved, the timeline for
my research, and my data collection methods.

Rationale and Relevance

The ninth grade transition support program in my district has been operating for
three years. This is an ideal time to evaluate the framework, curriculum, and strategies
being used in order to highlight the strengths and successes of the program as well as
illuminate any gaps in the curriculum or areas for growth. As was shown in the preceding
chapter, freshman transition programs have been recognized by practitioners and
researchers as an important intervention for students who may struggle to persist to
graduation (Bottoms, 2008; Dedmond, 2008; Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Morgan & Hertzog,
2001; Roybal et al., 2014). If this research project shows that the PREP program is
having a positive effect on students’ academic and/or social emotional progress, we
should know about these benefits and capitalize on them. If, on the other hand, my
research shows that the PREP program is not sufficiently meeting the needs of students or teachers, we need to identify what is not working and make improvements. The literature review also revealed agreement among researchers about the importance of ongoing evaluation of transition programs in order to identify successes and gaps in implementation.

**Research Design and Methods**

This research project utilized a mixed methods data collection design in which both qualitative and quantitative data was collected and analyzed. While there continues to be a surprising amount of debate within the research community about what constitutes mixed methods, how to conduct it and whether it is an acceptable data collection design, many educational researchers acknowledge the benefits of collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. In this section I describe the background and theoretical basis for each type of data collection as well as explain the specific data I collected for my research. I also argue that the use of perception data in program evaluation has been underutilized, despite the fact that stakeholder perceptions ought to be of utmost concern for program evaluators.

**Mixed Methods Design**

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) explained, “Mixed methods research is formally defined as the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines qualitative and quantitative research techniques... into a single study” (p. 17). While both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods have merit on their own in educational research, some researchers have pointed out the benefits of mixed methods
research for the ability to collect and analyze both hard numerical data along with a more complex narrative accounts adding both precision and meaning to results (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

I chose to engage in a mixed methods design, what Small (2011) called a “confirmatory design” (p. 63), where all the data collected measures the same topic in order to make sure the results of my survey could be confirmed. But I also chose this design in order to provide more detail, nuance and personal voice to the survey data. By combining student and teacher interviews with the survey data collected, research participants were able to more fully describe and define their own experiences, which was a priority of my research.

Mixed methods design has a well established history as an evaluation tool. According to Greene, Caracelli and Graham (1989), mixed methods evaluation allows for triangulation of multiple data points to ensure findings are consistent. Additionally, the use of mixed methods may clarify findings and add more detail. By using both surveys and interviews, I was able to obtain both clear, concrete numerical data as well as a more thorough, rich and comprehensive understanding of the programs strengths and areas of growth.

Finally, proponents of mixed methods research argue that a major benefit of this approach is that in balances out the potential pros and cons of both qualitative and quantitative methods, allowing researchers the best of both approaches, while compensating for potential problems. As Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) stated, “the
goal of mixed methods research is not to replace [qualitative] or [quantitative] approaches but to draw from the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of both” (p. 15).

**Quantitative Data**

**Background.** Quantitative research is generally recognized as data collection methods involving numerical data and is thought to be more precise, objective and replicable (Harwell, 2011). Examples of quantitative data include surveys and tests. One of the benefits of quantitative data collection is that it can provide clear, precise numerical data and allows for relatively quick analysis (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2008).

**Quantitative data collected.** The quantitative data I collected for my research included 3 different surveys administered over the course of 4 months. Students were surveyed twice over the course of the 2016-2017 school year. The first survey was administered in February, at the start of the second semester. Students were asked a variety of questions related to their academic, social/emotional and future planning skill development, as well as the extent to which they believe the class was helping them be successful in high school and beyond (see Appendix A). The second survey was administered in May and asked similar questions as the first survey, though they were worded differently (see Appendix B). Students were also asked about whether the PREP classroom was a safe and supportive community and whether their teacher cared about them (as the literature review highlighted the importance of community and staff in creating an effective transition program).

In February, only thirty eight students took the survey despite there being approximately 70 students enrolled in PREP at the time. In May, I administered the
survey over several days in order to increase the number of students who were able to participate. As a result, fifty four students took the second survey. Some of the fifty four who took the second survey had taken the first survey while others may have been absent on the day the first survey was administered. Others who enrolled in the course mid-year, did not take the first survey as they had just begun the course and could not yet evaluate its effectiveness.

Surveys were administered in class, during the class period students were assigned. A tinyURL link was provided to students to access the survey. Neither survey asked for any identifying information although the first survey did ask students to identify their strengths and areas of growth as a learner. I did not access survey results until all students had taken the survey and, as such, have no knowledge of individual student responses. Students were assured that their answers were anonymous and urged to share their honest opinions.

Ninth grade teachers were also invited to complete a survey at the end of the 2016-2017 school year. The survey asked teachers to describe how their understanding of PREP had changed over the year and and to rate how effective the program was as helping students develop academic, social/emotional and future planning skills (see Appendix C). Additional information about the students and teachers participants can be found in the “Research Participants and Setting” section below.

Teacher surveys were administered via an email request with a link to the Google Form. No identifying information was collected other than the approximate number of students the teacher shared with me. Teachers were emailed several times over several
days to encourage participation in the survey. Eleven of the fifteen teachers who were invited to participate eventually took the survey.

**Qualitative Data**

**Background.** In contrast to quantitative data, qualitative data is used to understand perceptions, thoughts, or ideas through interviews, case studies or field work (Harwell, 2011). Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested using qualitative methods to “Identify variables that cannot be easily measured” (p. 45). They argued that qualitative methods should be used when “we need a complex detailed understanding of the issue” and “when we want to empower individuals to share their stories” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 45). While qualitative research can provide descriptions of personal experiences in rich detail (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), it is nearly impossible for the researcher to be unbiased or totally objective. In fact, Harwell (2011) noted that one of the hallmarks of qualitative research is that “different results could be obtained from the same respondent depending on who the researcher is” (p. 148).

**Qualitative data collected.** Thirteen interviews were conducted during May and June of 2017 to gather more in-depth, nuanced and detailed opinions on the efficacy of the program. Ten students who had been in PREP during the 2014-2015 or 2015-2016 school year were interviewed, along with all three ninth grade English teachers. The interviews took place during the school day and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. I took notes during the interview process and took great care to transcribe interviewees’ answers word for word while the interviews were being conducted.
Student survey questions can be found in Appendix D. Teacher survey questions can be found in Appendix E.

**Perception Data as an Evaluation Tool**

Mixed methodology acknowledges the importance of gathering data from more than one source or method. Using both surveys and interviews allowed me to gather precise numerical data while also gathering more in-depth, detailed descriptions of the programs efficacy. More importantly, I wanted to make sure that my evaluation centered on the most important stakeholders and that the voices of those impacted by the program was elevated. Rather than rely on numerical data such as grades and attendance, I wanted to highlight how the students and teachers perceived the program. I was particularly interested in highlighting student voice in my research. Far too often we educators fail to solicit feedback from those most directly impacted by our decisions, the students. In fact, Akos and Galassi (2004) acknowledged this error, stating, “It’s surprising however that in most of the transition research that voices of those who are most directly involved—the students along with parents and teachers-have been heard only infrequently” (p. 212). Smith, Akos, Lim and Wiley (2008) echoed this sentiment, remarking, “Education transitions are complex and research on the topic has generally been limited to looking at the organization structures or student perceptions in academic and social realms” (p. 33) rather than using student perception data as a program evaluation tool.

My research, which centers stakeholder perceptions as an essential evaluation tool contributes to the general body of educational research on high school transition
programs while also reminding practitioners to include those most directly impacted in the evaluation and decision making process.

**Research Participants and Setting**

The research was conducted in a large urban high school in the Upper Midwest of the United States serving approximately 1,100 students. The racial makeup of the student population is 48% African American; 34% Asian, mostly Hmong; 9% Hispanic; 8% Caucasian; and less than two percent American Indian. English Language Learners comprise 16% of the student population, and 20% receive Special Education Services. Just under six percent are categorized as homeless or highly mobile, and slightly more than 85% receive free or reduced lunch.

**Student Survey Participants**

The particular research participants for this study included nearly 60 of the students enrolled in the PREP program. The students served in PREP are racially and demographically representative of the school as a whole and include students from various racial backgrounds, students receiving special education and English language services and students on free and reduced lunch. The course as described in Chapter 1 is designed as a transition support for students identified as “at-risk” based on quantitative data as well as counselor or teacher recommendation. Although the PREP course is designed to be a year-long course, students are enrolled through the beginning of third quarter. Those students who are enrolled at the start of the year were generally recommended by their eighth grade counselor and met at least one of the following criteria, 1) reading score between 25-40 percentile, 2) one or more Fs, 3) one or more
suspensions and/or 4) between 85-94% attendance in eighth grade. Students who are enrolled during ninth grade are generally recommended by their teachers or counselors and are often identified using our district's data tracking system that categorizes students as “priority”, “focus” or “on track” based on grades, attendance and behavior incidents.

**Student Interview Participants**

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of student perceptions, one-on-one interviews were also conducted with 10 students who had been enrolled in PREP during the previous two years. Previously enrolled students were interviewed to preserve current student-teacher relationships and remove any risk of students feeling pressured to give positive responses.

Great effort was made to interview students who were representative of the school and PREP program. I initially invited a total of 23 students to participate, and eventually interviewed 10. Five students were male, five were female. Five were African American, two were Hmong, one was Caucasian and two were Latino. Two students had IEP’s and 90% received free or reduced lunch. Of the thirteen student interviewed, ten had passed all of the classes they had been enrolled in, two were considered On-Track, because they were not missing more than 1 semester of core course credits, and two students were considered Off-Track because they had more than 2 semesters of core credits missing and were not on track to graduate without making up the missing credits.

**Teacher Survey Participants**

Fifteen ninth grade teachers were invited to take two surveys over the course of the year. Of those 15 invited teachers, three were English Language Arts, three algebra,
three physical science, three social studies and three special education teachers who serve students also enrolled in the PREP program. The racial and gender makeup of the teachers surveyed includes six white females, six white males, one black male, one Asian female and one American Indian female. Teachers surveyed have been working at the school between one and fifteen years with the majority having been there for fewer than five years.

**Teacher Interview Participants**

The three ninth grade English Language Arts teachers were invited to participate in one interview in April of 2017, and all three accepted. I chose to interview English teachers because much of the academic focus of PREP is on literacy skills and I have been meeting with the ninth grade English team to collaborate for the past year. I believed they were the teachers with the most knowledge and understanding of the PREP program’s goals and curriculum.

Two of those teachers interviewed at the same time while the third teacher was interviewed independently. The three teachers were diverse in age, gender, race and years of service. Teacher A is a African American male in his early 30’s. He has been a teacher for two years, both years serving as a ninth grade ELA teacher. He also completed his student teaching residency here under the direction of Teacher C. Teacher B is a white female in her late 40’s. She has been teaching for 23 years, 16 of those at this current school. Teacher C is a white male in his 50’s. He was been teaching ELA for 18 years, all of them at this school.
**Human Subject Committee Protocol**

In order to conduct my research I had to engage in a lengthy Human Subject Committee (HSC) approval process through Hamline University, as well as through the school district where the research was conducted. Both institutions reviewed and approved my research proposal, survey and interview questions, as well as my proposed process for obtaining parental consent, my timeline for completion and my plan for communicating results to stakeholders. Both teacher and student participation was voluntary and students were required to get parental consent before engaging in the surveys. Each survey was administered anonymously and participants were notified they could withdraw consent at any time. The data was stored on a password locked personal computer that I kept with me at all times.

No individual student data with identifiable names or traits was be utilized. Student interview notes were taken without identifying the student by name. Interview transcripts were kept on my password protected personal computer.

**Conclusion**

Chapter Three describes my research rationale and methods, participants, and timeline as well as some limitations in this particular research study. A mixed methods approach was employed in order to gain a wide breadth as well as depth of data. Both students and teachers were consulted in an attempt to understand how the people most impacted by the program felt about its efficacy in supporting students academic and social/emotional skill development and whether the program is helping to ensure that at-risk student successfully transition into high school. It was vitally important to me to
ensure that those voices were at the forefront of my program review. Chapter Four will provide an analysis of the three data sets collected and results of the qualitative and quantitative data utilized.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

My research question for this project was, do students and teachers perceive the PREP program to be effective in meeting the goals of a high school transition program? Using both surveys and interviews to inform my findings, I attempted to highlight the opinions and ideas of the most important stakeholders, the students and teachers impacted by the program. Over a four month period, I surveyed current PREP students twice, conducted thirteen interviews with former PREP students, surveyed ninth grade content area teachers once, and interviewed three ninth grade English teachers. The results of the surveys and interviews are presented in this chapter.

Both surveys and interviews asked for feedback in three specific areas: academic skills, social/emotional skills and future planning skills. In the surveys these skills were further broken down into specific academic or social/emotional skills. For example, both student and teacher surveys asked separate questions about whether students were developing reading skills, writing skills and study habits. Major findings include general trends in the data as well as more specific data about which skills students and teachers felt were particularly impacted by the course.

Results

I chose to focus my research on the three areas listed above: academic skill development, social/emotional skill development and future planning skill development because each area had been identified in the literature review as an essential component
of an effective transition support program. For my project I asked students and teachers to rate whether they believed PREP was helping students develop these overarching skill categories. Additionally, I identified discrete skills within the academic and social/emotional skill categories that I was particularly interested in seeing if students were developing. This section begins with the results of the broad goals I measured followed by a breakdown of those discrete skills students and teachers were asked about in both the surveys and interviews.

Overall, both student and teacher perceptions of the PREP program and its impact on student skill development were overwhelmingly positive. In both the first and second student survey, a large majority of students indicated that the PREP class was helping them develop their academic, social/emotional and future planning skills. Teachers also agreed or strongly agreed that PREP was helping students develop skills in all three areas (Figures 1.1-1.5).

**Figure 1.1.** Student Survey #1
In both the first and second survey, students were asked whether they believed they were developing academic and social/emotional skills in general. Nearly 84% of students agreed or strongly agreed they were developing academic skills and nearly 87% agreed they were developing social/emotional skills as a result of PREP.

Questions on survey read:
Prepare me for high school success
Plan for college and career future
Build or improve my academic skills
Build or improve my social skills
Other: _________________

Figure 1.2. Student Survey #1

Figure 1.3. Student Survey #2
In the second survey, fewer students agreed that PREP had helped them develop academic or social/emotional skills with 77.8% and 66.7% agreeing respectively. Still, nearly 89% agreed that the class helped prepare them for success in high school and 64% believed in helped them prepare for success in college and careers. Moreover, nearly 80% of students indicated they would “definitely” enroll in PREP class if it were offered to them in tenth grade and an additional 16.7% said they would “maybe” take PREP in 10th grade. Only two students, of the 54 who took the survey, indicated they would not take PREP in tenth grade if it were offered.
*Questions Read:
- Prepare for success in high school
- Plan for their college and career future
- Build or improve their academic skills
- Build or improve their social skills

Figure 1.5. Teacher Survey

Teacher responses were similar to students’ on the end of the year survey in terms of whether PREP prepared students for success in high school and college or careers with 90.9% and 63% agreeing respectively. However, teachers agreed at significantly higher percentages that PREP helped students develop academic and social/emotional skills with nearly 91% agreeing about academic skills and 72% agreeing about social/emotional skills.

Interviews with former PREP students and current English teachers further bear out the conclusion that students and teachers perceive the PREP program to be meeting program goals of increasing students’ academic, social/emotional and future planning skills. Student J summed it up like this,
It's a good place to get help with your work and get you started in your first year of high school. It helps you get organized and learn how to advocate for yourself; I didn’t know how to do that before. I feel like [the] class is helping students get better at things. (Personal interview, June 9, 2017)

**Specific Academic Skills**

The discrete academic skills I asked about in the surveys were reading, writing, organization and study habits. Using a 1-4 scale in which 1 meant “not at all” and 4 meant “a lot” students answered a series of questions about the extent to which PREP class had helped them develop these skills. Of the four specific academic skills, students indicated PREP had the most impact on their writing and organization.

**Writing skills.** In the first survey, 92% of students believed the class had helped them improve their writing “some” or “a lot” (see Figure 2.1). By the second survey, only 81% of students felt this way. However, more students reported their writing skills had improved “a lot” because of the class by the second survey (see Figure 2.2).

*Figure 2.1. Student Survey #1; 1=not at all, 2=a little, 3=some, 4=a lot*
Figure 2.2. Student Survey #2

Student interviews and short answer questions allowed me to learn more about which writing practices students felt were particularly impactful. Student E reported “writing everyday was really good practice. This year we have a lot of writing assignments so that 5 minutes of writing helped me get used to writing for a longer period of time” (Personal interview, May 22, 2017) while Student J said, “The persuasive essay helped me because I had never written an essay in my other classes but this year I had to so it prepared me for it” (Personal interview, June 9, 2017). Survey responses included “[it] has helped me like writing more” and “[helped me with] sentence and paragraph writing” (Student Survey #2, May 2017).

Teacher’s perceptions about students’ writing improvement was similar to that of the students with a majority reporting PREP had contributed “some” to improvement. A smaller percentage of teachers believed PREP had helped “a lot”.
Figure 2.3. Teacher Survey

Teacher C put his thoughts about PREP’s impact on writing and reading skills this way,

I think PREP is doing exactly what it need to...for PREP to reinforce reading and writing is more than enough because without PREP the kids who are in it would not be receiving enough emphasis on reading and writing. They will get the reading and writing [in English class] but they won't get the support and that's what they need. (Personal interview, June 7, 2017)

Reading skills. Over 68% of students reported the class had helped them improve their reading skills on both surveys. However, nearly 30% of students felt PREP had a little or no impact on their reading skills. This is an area of growth for the program.
Several students did mention reading skills in their interviews although it was not a major focal point. Students B and G both mentioned AVID critical reading strategies they found beneficial.

Teachers tended to have more positive view of PREP’s impact on reading skills than students, with over 90% reporting it helped “some” or “a lot” (see Figure 3.3). Only one of the 11 teachers who responded to the survey believed PREP had little impact on reading. That being said, in the short answer portion of the teacher survey, one teacher did suggest reading as an area of improvement for the program.

In general, PREP students are improving their academic skills in the following areas:
Figure 3.3. Teacher Survey

**Organization.** In the first survey, 89.5% of students agreed that PREP was helping them develop their organization skills “some” or “a lot” (see Figure 4.1) while in the second survey it was 81% (see Figure 4.2). Despite this slight decrease, a majority of students felt the course had a positive impact on their organization skills.

**Figure 4.1. Student Survey #1; 1=not at all, 2=a little, 3=some, 4=a lot**

Several students reported how their organization skills had improved in the short answer section of the survey stating, “PREP has helped me stay organized”, “[it] kept me organized and on top of my grades”, “[it helped me] being more independent and organized” (Student Survey #2, May 2017). Student J, in her interview also said, “Organization was a big one. I learned to stay organized. Now when I have a binder I use
dividers and label them. In middle school I didn't do that” (Personal interview, June 9, 2017).

Similar to students, the vast majority of teacher respondents believed PREP had “some” or “a lot” of impact on organization skills (see Figure 4.3). Teacher interviewees also noted how PREP students’ organization skills improved. “Organization is something I see with my PREP students. Not only binder organization but also...things I don't necessarily cover in class, ‘how can I break this assignment down into workable parts I can complete?’” (Personal interview, May 19, 2017).

In general, PREP students are improving their academic skills in the following areas:

![Bar chart showing improvement in writing, reading, study habits, organization, and collaboration]

**Figure 4.3.** Teacher Survey

**Study habits.** Over seventy percent of students in both surveys reported the course helped them develop better study habits. The percentage of students reporting PREP helped them “a lot” increased by nearly 8% in the second survey.
Several interview participants discussed how their study habits had been impacted by the course. Student A said, “I write lots more notes than I did” (Personal interview, May 5, 2017), Student C noted that work days helped “get homework done, get ready for quizzes and tests” (Personal interview, May 12, 2017) and Student E noted that PREP helped her “being more organized with classes and homework and learning how to manage time better and how to keep priorities in order” (Personal interview, May 22, 2017). Student survey responses also highlighted that PREP helped them keep track of their work and grades, prepare for tests and focus on their work (Student Survey #2, May 2017).
All eleven teachers who responded to the survey agreed that PREP helped students with study habits “some” or “a lot”. No teacher believes PREP has little or no impact on this area. One comment from the survey simply stated, “PREP is helping the students develop good habits to use throughout high school and beyond” (Teacher Survey, June, 2017). Teacher C made this observation,

[The] primary skill they developed might not be something that would be called academic, but I would call it academic, and that is persistence. So that kids learned that tasks remain, they don't go away and that if you attend to them, if you persist, you can complete them and that is what you need to do, a habit you need to develop.

He went on to explain that a major benefit of PREP in his view is “Support, support, support, giving added recognition to academic work” (Personal interview, June 7, 2017).

![In general, PREP students are improving their academic skills in the following areas:](image)

*Figure 5.3. Teacher Survey*

**Specific Social/Emotional Skills**

Social/emotional skills are an implicit part of many content curriculums. However, the PREP course has an explicit focus on developing the specific
social/emotional skills students need in order to manage the stress, conflicts and communication barriers that can negatively impact academic performance. Social/emotional skills, as defined by the surveys, included working independently, working collaboratively, self-advocacy (asking for help), managing emotions, resolving conflict and setting and accomplishing goals. Overall, student responses indicate they felt PREP had a significant impact on their social/emotional skill development. When there were no significant changes in student perceptions between the first and second surveys, I only display results from one of the surveys. If, however, the results of the two surveys were different, both data sets are displayed.

The social/emotional skill that students thought PREP impacted most positively were setting and accomplishing goals. Nearly 90% of students indicated PREP helped them “some” or “a lot” and zero students said the course had helped them “not at all”.

Several teachers noted their reluctance to separate social/emotional skills from academic skills or argued that certain skills, like persistence and emotional management, while technically social/emotional skills, ought be to considered academic skills. They noted that development of social/emotional skills had a major impact on academic achievement. Teacher B stated, “social/emotional skills are academic skills. I think a lot of businesses would agree, those soft skills are necessary for working on a team. Academia is one of the worst systems for separating the two [skill sets]” (Personal interview, May 19, 2017). Teacher C echoed this argument noting that persistence may be seen as a social/emotional skills, but he believes it is in fact an academic skill that students in PREP are developing (Personal interview, June 7, 2017).
**Working independently and collaboratively.** Over 80% of students agreed that PREP helped them develop both independent and collaborative work skills. In the second survey, the highest percentage of students indicated that PREP has helped them with this skills “a lot” (see Figure 6.1).

**Figure 6.1.** Student Survey #2; blue=a lot, red=some, orange=a little, green=not at all

Student C highlighted some of the ways he felt PREP helped him develop him collaboration skills saying, “[it helped me] in communicating with teammates. I usually only pair up with people I know, but I got better at being with people who are not in my comfort zone” (Personal interview, May 12, 2017). Student I, who describes himself as someone who struggles to control himself said, “Socially I got better. When it comes to working with others, I got better at handling certain situations” (Personal interview, June 5, 2017).

Teacher responses to improvements in independent as well as collaborative work mirrored those of students, with the majority of them perceiving PREP to be helping “some” or “a lot” (see Figure 6.2). Teachers also noted specific students for whom they
had seen great improvement in their ability to work with others. Teacher A, in discussing a specific student shared,

[she] has developed, her wall that she had when she first came has come down.

Her concern for others and her concern for her academic success has come through a lot this year. And just, her participation with others has become more...productive. (Personal interview, May 19, 2017)

Teacher C also described how students in the PREP class had “a greater capacity to listen, not just to instructions, but to one another, perhaps to themselves. They developed a greater ability to speak purposefully” (Personal interview, June 7, 2017).

In general, PREP students are improving their academic skills in the following areas:

![Bar chart](image)

*Figure 6.2. Teacher Survey; blue=a lot, red=some, orange=a little*

**Self advocacy.** There was a significant increase in the percentage of students who indicated the course had helped them develop their self advocacy skills “a lot”. In the first survey, 39.5% of students chose “a lot” to describe how much PREP had helped them (see Figure 7.1). In the second survey, 57% of students chose this option, a 17% increase (see Figure 7.2).
A number of students highlighted how their ability to advocate had been impacted by the course. Students mentioned they now felt prepared to talk to teachers without feeling afraid or uncomfortable. Student B noted, “Even my teachers say ‘you got so much better at asking for help!’” (Personal interview, May 8, 2017). Student C shared “I got better at asking questions and talking to teachers if I don't understand something. I also improved opening up if something’s not right and I need advice about what to do” (Personal interview, May 12, 2017). Student F said, “I actually raise my hand now or I
will ask my peers even if I don't know them. Solving conflicts too, like when I have to make up grades I actually talk to my teachers to sort it out” (Personal interview, June 1, 2017). Similarly, Student J highlighted her behavior change by saying, “when I have a question I email or talk to my teachers. I probably never would have done that myself” (Personal interview, June 9, 2017).

Teachers too recognized the improvements students in PREP made in their ability to self-advocate. More than half of respondents reported that students had improved “a lot” and another 36% agreed they had improved “some” (see Figure 7.3). Teacher A observed that he has noticed that PREP students “going directly to a teacher regarding an assignment or grade happens frequently” (Personal interview, May 19, 2017). Teacher B noted,

I think they learn how not to be passive about school and they learn to be their own best advocate which is a lifelong skill and to be successful starting now...getting them to care and verbalize their care about their work. Like when I get an email or a note from them that they wrote in PREP class. (Personal interview, May 19, 2017)

![Figure 7.3. Teacher Survey; blue=a lot, red=some, orange=a little](image-url)
Managing emotions Although the majority of students, over 70%, felt the PREP helped them develop skills to manage their emotions “some” or ‘a lot’, nearly 30% of students did not feel PREP was having much of an impact on this area of the social/emotional skills development in either survey.

![Figure 8.1. Student Survey #1; 1=not at all, 2=a little, 3=some, 4=a lot](image)

While there were many students who did not feel PREP was particularly impactful in helping them manage their emotions, Student I, who self-identified as struggling to manage his emotions, stated

> it got me more open, made me open up more and interact with people, [and] make friends. [It] helped me with my anger issues a bit too because sometimes getting mad isn't the best way. It reminded me that good things can happen if you don't outburst. Back then I didn't used to talk to anybody, I used to always be mad. Even though I’m going through stuff now, I out here talking to people about it.

(Personal interview, June 5, 2017)

Interestingly, teachers felt that PREP had a significant impact on emotional management. Both in the survey and interview, emotional management was an area of strength according to teachers. While 90% of teachers responded that PREP helped
“some” or “a lot” in the survey (see Figure 8.2), it came up repeatedly in the interviews.

Teacher B shared her thoughts this way,

...emotional regulation is an academic skill even though it's not talked about [that way]. The soft skills have fallen away from academia because of the testing era so if a student can think and feel about their work in a certain way, they can learn to delay some gratification, reward themselves later, how to prioritize and self-advocate.

She went on to say,

If a kid is too angry they are not going to function throughout the day. If a kid is not regulating their emotions everything else isn't going to happen and...they are going to get sent out of class. [They] need calm waters and support to feel like you have a network that is going to catch you. (Personal interview, May 19, 2017)

Teacher A agreed, stating the PREP helped students with “regulating anger, self-reflection, happiness, caring, sympathy and sadness” (Personal interview, May 19, 2017).

Figure 8.2. Teacher Survey; blue=a lot, red=some, orange=a little
**Resolving conflict.** Most students believe PREP helped them develop their ability to resolving conflict “some”. However, by the second survey, the percentage of students who felt it had helped them “a lot” had increased from 18% to 33% (see Figures 9.1 & 9.2).

![Figure 9.1. Student Survey #1; 1=not at all, 2=a little, 3=some, 4=a lot](image)

**Figure 9.1.** Student Survey #1; 1=not at all, 2=a little, 3=some, 4=a lot

**PREP class helped me improve these skills this year:**

![Figure 9.2. Student Survey #2; blue=a lot, red=some, orange=a little, green=not at all](image)

**Figure 9.2.** Student Survey #2; blue=a lot, red=some, orange=a little, green=not at all

Two student interviews pointed out specific tasks that they felt helped them develop their ability to resolve conflict. Student E stated, “Socratic Seminars helped me disagree better...Now when I disagree with someone [I know] there’s a much nicer way to disagree that just telling them ‘you’re wrong’” (Personal interview, May 22, 2017). Student J, a student from the 2014-2015 school year, remembered an activity,
...when we had to give a compliment to our peer and the person I had to
comepliment was a person I had a problem with and that was the first time we had
talked in two years. Now we're friends and work together and talk a lot. It was an
icebreaker for us even though we had problems in middle school. (Personal
interview, June 9, 2017)

In contrast to the difference in perception between students and teachers about
managing emotions, a smaller percentage of teachers than students believed PREP helped
students resolve conflict. Nearly 30% of teachers indicated that it only helped “a little”
and, despite the fact that teachers recognized the social/emotional skills development
students in PREP exhibited, none discussed conflict resolution directly in their

In general, PREP students are improving their academic skills in the following
areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Blue (a lot)</th>
<th>Red (some)</th>
<th>Orange (a little)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Independently</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning for the future</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Advocacy</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Resolution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9.3. Teacher Survey; blue = a lot, red = some, orange = a little

**Setting and accomplishing goals.** In the first survey nearly 90% of students
perceived PREP to be helping them with goals “some” or “a lot” with a larger percentage
believing it was helping “some” (see Figure 10.1). By the second survey, nearly 60% of
students indicated it had helped them “a lot”, a 16% increase (see Figure, 10.2). Also
significantly, zero students indicated PREP was not helping them “at all” with goal setting.

![Figure 10.1. Student Survey #1](image)

**Figure 10.1.** Student Survey #1; 1=not at all, 2=a little, 3=some, 4=a lot

**Because of PREP class, I am improving my skills in DEFINITION AND ACHIEVING GOALS**

![Bar chart](image)

**PREP class helped me improve these skills this year:**

![Bar chart](image)

**Figure 10.2.** Student Survey #2; blue=a lot, red=some, orange=a little. Yellow highlighted phrase is “Setting and accomplishing goals”.

Interestingly, despite it being an area students felt PREP had significant impact, it was difficult to find responses in the interviews that related directly to setting or accomplishing specific goals. Student D did say, “Last year when I came into PREP I had a 1.5 GPA. At the end of the year I had a 3.5 GPA. I have been on the A or B Honor Roll every quarter since” (Personal interview, May 19, 2017). Additionally, one short answer from Survey #2 stated that PREP “helped me make goals for myself” (May, 2017).
A majority of teachers agreed with student assessments that PREP helped with setting and accomplishing goals (see Figure 10.3). The percentage of teachers who agreed it helped “some” was 54.5% while 36.4% believed it helped “a lot”. Students on the other hand had the converse opinion with 35% reporting it helped “some” and 56% believing it helped “a lot” (see Figure 10.2).

In general, PREP students are improving their academic skills in the following areas:

![Bar chart showing improvement in various skills]

Figure 10.3. Teacher Survey; blue=a lot, red=some, orange=a little. Yellow highlighted phrase is “Setting and Accomplishing goals”.

Future Planning Skills

Planning for the future was not separated out into specific skills in the surveys. The surveys simply asked to rate the extent to which they believed PREP class helped them plan for their futures in college or careers. Similarly, students interviews contained just one question about whether PREP helped them prepare for future success. In both the first and second survey, a majority of students agreed that PREP was helping them with this skill “a lot” (see Figure 11.1). There was no significant change in student answers between the two surveys.
A number of student interviewees had strong opinions about the impact of PREP on their future planning. Student A noted, “the things we learned, like advocacy, we can use outside of high school, like everyday life. A lot of things we did help us in college and when we have jobs” (Personal interview, May 5, 2017). Student B stated, PREP was the only class I had a good grade in last year...I started thinking ‘if I had better grades in all my classes i could do better’ and I decided ‘next year I’m going to do better’ and I am!” (Personal interview, May 8, 2017). When asked if there was anything else he wanted people to know about PREP, Student C simply said, “They should know it gets you college ready. (Personal interview, May 12, 2017)

Similar to students, a very large percentage of teachers agreed that PREP helps students plan for future success with 63.6% indicating it helped “some” and 27.3% saying “a lot” (see Figure 11.2). Teacher A noted that he had heard students discussing the career research they had engaged in and that “they know what other careers are related to the career they want and what they have to do to get there” (Personal interview,
May 19, 2017). Teacher A shared about a specific student who was “still trying to
connect the dots but [talks] about his plans for the future” (Personal interview, May 19,
2017).

In general, PREP students are improving their academic skills in the following
areas:

![Figure 11.2. Teacher Survey; blue=a lot, red=some, orange=a little](image)

**Other Results**

While the main focus of my research centered on how students and teachers felt
about the program’s efficacy in helping students develop necessary skills, I also asked for
feedback about how the program might be improved and for any other feedback. From
these questions, two themes emerged that are worth noting, suggestions for improvement
and misconceptions about the program.

I also included questions on both student surveys about the extent to which
students’ believed the class was safe and supportive and whether their teacher cared
about them. The results from these questions are discussed below.

**Suggestions for Improvement**

Although the overall feedback about PREP was very positive from students and
teachers, areas for improvement were suggested. Students noted that they would have
liked more targeted math and reading instruction, as well as more field trips. Student B suggested adding more opportunities for meditation and mindfulness (Personal interview, May 8, 2017). Three students also mentioned communication skills as an area they wish PREP had helped them with more.

While two teachers wanted more emphasis on reading strategies, most of their suggestions for improvement involved greater collaboration and communication between content teachers and the PREP teacher in order to better align curriculum. In his interview, Teacher C suggested that PREP ought to focus on fewer skills.

I think the PREP class is doing exactly what it needs to. It should not try to do more. It’s possible it would be more effective if it did less. What we need more than anything is focus… I think bringing in anything more would only water it down. (Personal interview, June 7, 2017)

Several teachers mentioned a desire to know more about the curriculum and asked if I would share my syllabus and curriculum with the rest of the staff. This is certainly an area that I intend to improve as it was clear that a number of teachers either did not know much about the curriculum or were confused about what was taught in PREP.

**Teacher Confusion**

Both the survey and interviews demonstrated that many content area teachers remain unclear about program basics, including the curriculum, how students are identified and enrolled in the course, and the goals of the course. Not surprisingly, teachers are most aware of the aspects that impact them which are the work/study days with tutors. On these days, students are able to work with trained adult tutors to clear up
misunderstandings or confusion about the content in their other classes and to complete work to catch up or stay current. I regularly communicate with teachers about work days and often turn in work to teachers. Because of this, many teachers are fully aware of this aspect of the program. They are less aware that the class also has its own curriculum that includes regular reading, writing, and projects, with an emphasis on discussing, self-assessing and improving social/emotional skills. I use academic tasks to investigate and develop social/emotional skills. One teacher wrote in the survey, “soooo much better than a plain study hall. Our kids need more than just extra time!” Another noted,

I don’t see all of what happens in PREP… I can only comment on how PREP class helps to support the work that I do in my class. Maybe it would be good to know more about what happens on other days of the week and what students are doing in the class. (Teacher Survey, 2017)

Safe and Supportive Community

Students were asked in both surveys whether they believe the PREP class is a safe and supportive community. In the first survey they were asked if they believed their teacher cared about them and, in the second survey, if they would take PREP if it were offered in the tenth grade. While these questions do not necessarily relate directly to skills they may need in high school, Beland (2007) suggested that a strong sense of community and a caring teacher are important elements of a transition program and necessary to sustain motivation and persistence in the face of challenges.

Students overwhelmingly agreed that the PREP class was a safe and supportive community and that their teacher cared about them as an individual. Nearly all agreed
that they would take the PREP course in tenth grade if it were offered (see Figures 12.1-12.4). Student interviewees also brought up these themes despite the fact that no questions about community or care were asked. Student C remembered his class this way, “we were all respected and always shared how we felt and got to know each other what we are dealing with. Then maybe you could talk to them and comfort them” (Personal interview, May 12, 2017). Student J said, “I feel like in your class, you really cared about the students and helping students get better” (Personal interview, June 9, 2017). Student E shared, “Your positivity rubbed off on me and I feel like I am a more positive person now.” as well as how much she enjoyed engaging in community builders and peace-keeping circles in class” (Personal interview, May 22, 2017). A number of students brought up circles and community builders are being importance and impactful elements of the class.

![I feel safe and supported in PREP class](image)

Figure 12.1. Student Survey #1
**Figure 12.1. Student Survey #1**

My PREP teacher cares about me as a student and an individual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>52.6%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

38 responses

**Figure 12.3. Student Survey #2**

PREP class has been a safe and supportive community for me.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Likelihood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>70.4%</td>
<td>A lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>A little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

54 responses

**Figure 12.4. Student Survey #2**

If PREP class were offered in 10th grade, I would take it

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>79.6%</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>Maybe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

54 responses
While it is clear from this feedback there are aspects of the PREP courses to improve or alter, and that effective communication and collaboration with other staff members is an area of growth, overall teachers understand that the course goes beyond a study hall and provides students the opportunity to develop important skills and build community. Additionally, 100% of students felt safe in the PREP classroom and a large majority of them would take the PREP class in tenth grade were it offered. This data shows the positive impact the course has on students and teachers.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explained the findings of my research project, an evaluation of a transition support course, based on feedback provided by those most directly impacted by the course. I presented the findings from both surveys and interviews conducted over the course of 4 months during the 2016-2017 school year. My results show that both students and teachers believe that the PREP program is meeting its goals of improving student academic, social/emotional and future planning skills. My data also show that the stakeholders agree the course helps students prepare for success in high school and beyond in a safe and supportive environment.
CHAPTER FIVE

REFLECTION

Introduction

In the months between starting my research project, and completing my capstone, the district I work for, and conducted this research in, drastically reduced funding for the PREP program. It is impossible for me to reflect on this project and my learning without acknowledging this unfortunate fact. It is difficult for me to square the overwhelmingly positive feedback students and teachers shared and their passionate belief in the program’s effectiveness with the reality that this program’s budget and staff were dramatically decreased and that fewer students at my school and across this district will be served by it in the coming year. When I began my research, I knew from my own experience the impact the program was having. Now that my research is complete, I know that the students and teachers involved in the program also understand its impact. In Chapter One, I noted how quickly educational initiatives come and go, often without evaluation, and how important it was to me to give voice to the students and teachers most directly impacted by this innovative program and to use their own perspective as an evaluation tool. The decision to reduce the PREP program only strengthens my conviction that these voices need to be heard.

My research set out evaluate the transition support program in which I teach and to highlight the voices and opinions of those most directly impacted, the students enrolled in the program and the content area teachers who share their students with me. My
research question asked, do students and teachers perceive the PREP program to be effective in meeting the goals of a high school transition program?

In Chapter 1, I introduced my own history as a learner and educator, shared the components of the PREP program and my rationale for choosing this research project. Chapter 2 included a review of pertinent literature on transition support programs, including why they were developed, best practices in designing transition programs and courses and an overview of some of the models currently in use across the country. Chapter 3 described the methods and participants in my research. Chapter 4 described and analyzed the information learned from the surveys and interviews I conducted with students and teachers. In this final chapter I will reflect on my own learning and growth as a result of this project, identify some of the limitations of this study and suggest possibilities for future research and action.

**Reflection on Major Findings**

Prior to conducting this survey I knew anecdotally how important the PREP class was for struggling students. I knew that students appreciated the additional time to complete work, the focus on identity and values, and the intentional development of personal confidence and classroom community. I also knew my colleagues appreciated that our students were given time to complete work and that some of the most challenging students received additional support. The fact that my research affirmed this did not surprise me.

What did surprise me was the extent to which both students and teacher felt students’ academic skills had improved, and how much teachers noticed and appreciated
the focus on social/emotional skill development. I had anticipated more pushback from teachers. Because I am not a traditional content teacher, I was surprised by the extent content area teachers noted my contributions to students’ academic abilities. I was gratified to learn how much my colleagues believed in the PREP class and its impact on student achievement.

As my work on this project progressed, I became more aware of how infrequently we, as educators, ask stakeholders to weigh in on their experiences and how rich the feedback they will provide when asked. Moreover, I came to really understand that how students feel about their experience has a deep impact on their perception of their own abilities and their willingness to engage. If students are to perform as well as they can, they need to believe they are capable, they are improving, and that their teachers believe in and support them. The fact that my student perceived their skills to be improving led to higher achievement even if those improvements were not immediately reflected in a standardized assessment. Similarly, the fact that my colleagues felt like the PREP class helped them, by helping students, contributed to how they viewed the effectiveness of the course.

Seeing my work retold through others’ words and perceptions was a humbling and illuminating experience. Teaching practices that I engaged in without much forethought were highlighted by students who I had taught two years ago, while units I had spent hours painstakingly creating were barely mentioned. It reminded me of the Maya Angelou quote, “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel”. It reinforced for me the
importance of creating a safe and supportive classroom community, of asking students how they feel as often as possible and of keeping my students at the center of everything that I do.

While I was convinced of the critical need for the PREP program before I engaged in this research, my conviction was only strengthened through this process. I believe my research shows the real and perceived impact transition supports can have on students. My literature review and my research on teacher perceptions also revealed the extent to which other educators believe in the importance and effectiveness of these supports. While budgets are tight and districts always have to make difficult programming decisions, it is clear that the transition into high school is a critical time and that transition support programs offer opportunities to intervene and support our most vulnerable students.

**Connection to Literature Review**

My review of the literature revealed the critical importance of ninth grade in a student’s journey towards graduation, the specific elements of successful transition programs, and recommendations for transition support course curriculum focused on skill development. Although my research was primarily focused on assessing whether the PREP class was successful with the curricular components of a transition course, my findings also affirm the research on why these programs are necessary and how experts recommend they be set up in a school.
The Need for Transition Programs

Education researchers and practitioners have pointed out the importance of supporting students through various school transition periods. Although all students need supports, it is clear that students who struggle academically or socially have greater needs as they navigate new schools, new expectations, a heavier workload and more rigorous classes. The PREP program was designed to accomplish this goal. Teacher C put it this way,

I believe that PREP is necessary because...in the absence of PREP [at-risk students] are getting nothing like what other kids are getting to support their progress. No one is supporting (student name) or (student name) except you and they are kids that really run the risk of failing and falling behind. PREP doesn't change the fact that they are at-risk, but it does change which direction they fall. More of them are falling in the direction of passing classes, earning credit, [staying] on track to graduate than would otherwise be true. I think all we have to do is look to the past to see that is true. We know what happened before PREP and we know what is happening now that there is PREP (emphasis added).

(Personal interview, June 7, 2017)

Benner and Graham (2009) argued that many students interpret the decrease in support and oversight of their grades and attendance as a message that these things do not matter as much in high school, despite the fact that they may actually matter more. I know though, that my students were reminded almost daily about the importance of grades and attendance, especially in ninth grade. I know that my students understand how
important ninth grade is to their overall academic achievement and that they feel they are improving and making progress towards reaching their goals because of the additional support they receive in PREP.

**Expert Recommendations for Transition Programs**

In thinking about why, after three years, there is still significant misunderstanding about the PREP program from teachers who share many students with me, I was reminded that experts recommend teachers having common planning periods to discuss curriculum and student concerns (Dedmond, 2008). It is clear from my research that more collaboration with my colleagues would greatly strengthen the program and its impact on students. For example, the ELA teachers who I meet with weekly had a much better understanding of the PREP program. If I had been able to meet with others in the ninth grade team more often, I believe that there would be a better understanding of my curriculum and how it can support both students and teachers.

Bottoms (2008) suggested schools create a study period for ninth graders to deal with the increased workload of high school. However, my colleagues noted that the PREP course was much better than a study hall. In the teacher survey, one stated, “soooo much better than a plain study hall. Our kids need a lot more than just extra time” (Teacher survey, May, 2017). I completely agree and work hard to ensure that students never start to believe that the main goal of PREP is to give them time to study. Although the time with tutors in an integral part of PREP, I ensure that students also believe that we work hard and learn important skills every day in class.
While the PREP program does not encompass some of the major structural changes recommended in the literature such as block scheduling or ninth grade academies, supporting students with an elective course has proven to be an effective intervention for at-risk students. This shows that schools do not necessarily have to opt for a major overhaul of their schedule or structure in order to support students during the critical first year of high school.

**Best Practices in Transition Courses**

Overall, my research clearly showed that a large majority of students and teachers believed the PREP program was helping students’ develop academic, social/emotional and future planning skills. As these three categories encompass the major goals effective transition support programs, I believe that PREP is a successful program.

**Academic skills.** Much of the recommendations on teaching academic skills focused on things like time management, note taking and goal setting (Dedmond, 2008, SREB, 2002). My research showed that transition support courses can also have an impact on literacy skills like reading and writing. Several of my former students did note in their interviews how much impact they felt PREP had on their note-taking skills and how much that had helped them as they moved into tenth and eleventh grade.

Researchers have noted that many students entering ninth grade are underprepared for the workload demands of high school and in particular, that many students may not have developed the academic independence skills needed to keep up (Belfanz & Herzog, 2007; Neild, 2009; Potter et al., 2001). Many of my students would certainly have fit in
this category of lacking academic independence. After the PREP course however, both students and teachers agreed that students increased their ability to work independently. While several researchers recommend whole ninth grade programs with intensive built in support provided for all students (Dedmond, 2008; Roybal et al., 2014; SREB, 2000), my research shows that one class targeting specific students can have a significant impact on students’ skills. That being said, our school’s On-Track data also shows that PREP is not as intensive a support as some students require (see Table 1).

Table 1

On-Track Data, 2015-2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Schools</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>% On-Track</th>
<th>Not Proficient on 8th MCA Reading N</th>
<th>% On-Track</th>
<th>Not Proficient on 8th MCA Math N</th>
<th>% On-Track</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No PREP</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>58.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some PREP</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Year PREP</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>53.2%</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No PREP</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>74.5%</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some PREP</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Year PREP</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No PREP</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>71.5%</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some PREP</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Year PREP</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No PREP</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>57.8%</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some PREP</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Year PREP</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While many of our students are doing better than their peers who met PREP criteria but were not enrolled in the class, they are not doing as well as the general population in terms of grades, credits earned or attendance. However, in order for students to maintain motivation, they must feel like they are capable and that they are making progress towards long-term goals (Walker & Greene, 2009). For at-risk students, perhaps even more than for other students, feeling like they are growing academically,
experiencing success and planning for a successful future, are integral to their overall academic performance.

**Social/emotional skills.** I was particularly surprised that all three teacher interviewees discussed the overlapping and interrelated relationship between academic and social/emotional skills. Their description of skills like persistence and emotional regulation as academic, rather than solely social/emotional skills, was both refreshing and reinforced my own belief that academic success requires social/emotional maturity. Educational researchers are also coming to this same conclusion. Authors such as Beland (2007) and Elias (2001) pointed to the interrelatedness of social/emotional skills and academic achievement. Beland (2001) reminded us that social/emotional skills are a necessity for young people entering the job market where employers expect people to be able to collaborate, regulate emotions and effectively solve problems. In summary, research shows the importance of explicitly teaching students these skills, best practices in transition programs include explicit instruction in social/emotional competence and, my research confirms that both students and teachers perceive the PREP program to be effectively teaching these skills.

**Future planning skills.** Dedmond (2008) argued that at-risk students need to envision a successful future for themselves in order to maintain motivation during high school. The fact that so many PREP students believe the course helped them plan for their future speaks to its power. My students were able to explore their own interests, strengths and skills and then research career fields they want to pursue. They also evaluated their options based on factors like education level needed, average salary, and
personal interests which allowed them to make choices and feel in control of their own future. As student I noted, “[PREP] helped me get a taste of how life is after school and helped me understand what I want to do in the future, what skills I have and what jobs I want and don't want” (Personal interview, June 5, 2017).

In both surveys and interviews, PREP students and ninth grade teachers affirmed the role PREP is having in helping students develop necessary academic, social/emotional and future planning skills. I believe the perception of those most impacted matters, and should be taken into account when evaluating a program.

**Limitations**

There were several limitations to my research that need to be acknowledged when reflecting on my findings. The first limitation of this project is that the research approval process took far longer than I anticipated. I had originally planned to have students and teachers complete a pre-survey at the beginning of the year to gauge their beliefs about what skills they most needed to develop. Because I was not able to get approval to complete my research until mid-year, I did not administer a pre-survey. While I believe the end results would not have changed, knowing which skills students felt they lacked would have added to the picture of student growth on specific academic, social/emotional or future planning skills.

During the interview process I noticed that it was far more difficult for students to identify what was not working in the PREP program than to identify what was working. Student interview participants had to be previously enrolled students, rather than currently enrolled students, in order to preserve the student-teacher relationship.
However, this meant that students had not been in the PREP class for nearly a year, in some cases two years, at the time of the interview. Students were great at remembering lessons, topics and units that they had enjoyed, but they struggled to identify what had not resonated. I believe this was mainly due to the distance they had from the class. I should have asked my current students for more specific and detailed feedback on what lessons and units did not work well.

A final limitation that I must acknowledge is the low student participation I had on the first survey. Only 38 of the approximately 60 students enrolled in February took the first survey. This was due to a high number of absences on the day I administered the survey and the fact that I did not follow up with absent students in the following days. Given that the results of the second survey were similar or even more positive than the first survey, I am not sure how it would have impacted the results, but it certainly limits the amount of information that can be learned if one looks at the first survey in isolation.

Despite these limitations, I believe my research results are important. As an innovative intervention program in it’s third year, my research can and should be used to inform decision makers about how we can support at-risk students as they move into high school. Perhaps more importantly, it may serve as a reminder or a model for the importance of centering stakeholder perception in any program evaluation process.

**Implications for Educators**

I believe it is important for educators, schools and districts to continue to invest in transition support programs. My research shows that students enrolled in the program felt their skills improved in all three categories and that their core content teachers agreed.
Developing necessary academic, social/emotional and future planning skills will help these students as they move through high school while believing they developed these skills will help them maintain motivation when challenges arise.

Increasing graduation rates and closing the achievement gap continue to be areas of major focus for districts across the country. Considerable research has already shown transition support programs are an effective intervention at a critical time in a student's educational life so that students stay on track and persist towards graduation. My research, which included the voices of those most impacted adds to this conclusion by illustrating that students and teachers involved in such a program understand its value.

Based on my findings, my own district ought to reconsider the funding cuts made to the PREP program. Any evaluation that have been done on the program by the district did not solicit or include the voices and opinions of the most important stakeholders, and I believe their perspective ought to be considered. The PREP program has only been implemented in the district for three years so while evaluation and demonstrable results must be a priority at this point, I believe the decrease in funding was premature.

While On-Track data systems have shown promise as a means to identify at-risk students, they are simply a data system, not an intervention, and should be viewed as such. Districts interested in using data tracking systems need to consider what to do with the data these systems provide and plan for interventions, such as the PREP class, that can intervene quickly to support students who may struggle with the transition to ninth grade.
I believe that all districts should consider implementing transition support programs in the ninth grade, whether to support identified at-risk student groups, or whole classes of incoming freshman. The research is clear that the first year of high school is a critical transition point in the life of a student and that academic and social/emotional skill development has positive effects for students.

Whether schools implement transition supports, my research also makes clear the importance of social/emotional skill development and reinforces the argument that skills such as emotional regulation and conflict resolution should be explicitly taught to students. The teachers I spoke to were adamant that not only are these skills important, they ought to be thought of as academic, rather than social/emotional skills. My colleagues repeatedly noted that the ability to maintain motivation, persevere during challenges and self-advocate, translated into academic achievement. While it can sometimes feel like social/emotional skill development takes time away from content, educators must find ways to embed these skills into all content areas.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Researchers interested in building on or expanding on my research might consider including perception data in program evaluation projects of all kinds. The voices of those most impacted should be a part of any evaluation and using a mixed methods design would add value and depth to any numerical data. Parent and family perception was not a part of this study but would be of great value in understanding how other stakeholders feel about a transition support program such as PREP. There would also be value in including the perception of the teachers of the courses themselves. Finally, a longitudinal
study of the students included in this project would allow researchers to evaluate the effectiveness over time and to understand whether or not the targeted students persisted to graduation and pursued college or careers.

**Next Steps**

Given the results of my research, I am eager to share what I have learned with district personnel in the hopes of beginning a discussion on re-establishing the PREP program district-wide. My data confirms what other researchers have found about the positive impact transition support programs can have on students’ skills development and the impact the programs can have on attendance, GPA, connection to school and even graduation rates. My research also affirms the importance of asking stakeholders to share their opinions and taking those opinions into account.

As a prepare for a new school year, I will be sharing the results of my research with personnel at both the school and district level. I will be sharing the results with all ninth grade teachers, counselors and the administrative team at my school. I will also be sharing my results with the Research and Evaluation Department at my district and the Superintendent. Finally, I will make my results available to other school sites that currently offer the PREP elective course, as well as those schools thinking about new ways to support incoming ninth grade students. I understand the difficult budget decisions district personnel have to make each year. I also know that supporting ninth graders and increasing graduation rates are top priorities of my district. Given budget constraints as well as the importance of continuing to implement the PREP program, I
will also use my results to identify grants and other funds that may be use to support this important work.

**Final Thoughts**

My love and commitment to the PREP program and its mission has only been strengthened through this research project. I am absolutely convinced that PREP has made a positive impact on many of students who, while brilliant and capable, needed the support PREP provided to be as successful as they can be in high school and beyond. I also believe this process, including reviewing current literature, designing and implementing a research program, and reflecting on the results of my project has made me a better teacher and advocate for my students and my program.

When I started preparing to teach this class more than three years ago I knew that I loved working with students, that social/emotional skills development was integral to academic achievement and that building positive relationships was required when working with our most vulnerable students. Now I also know the importance of helping students envision and plan for a successful future, literacy strategies that are effective, and how much transition support programs can impact student achievement.

When I began this research project, I was interested in learning more about how my program was impacting ninth grade students and teachers, whether we were achieving our goals of supporting students through critical transition year of ninth grade, and whether students were developing important academic, social/emotional and future planning skills. As I prepare to return to a new school year, with a new set of PREP
students, I am confident that this transition support class is meeting its goals, and more importantly, meeting the needs of our most important stakeholders, our students.
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Bottoms, G. (2008). Redesigning the ninth-grade experience: Reduce failure, improve achievement and increase high school graduation rates. Atlanta, Georgia: Southern Regional Education Board.


http://getfocusedstayfocused.org/9th_overview.php


Southern Regional Education Board (2002). *Opening doors to the future: Preparing low-achieving middle grades students to succeed in high school. 2002 outstanding practices.*


Appendix A-Student Survey #1

1. Describe yourself as a learner. What are your strengths and areas of growth?
   (Long answer)

2. Because of PREP class, I am improving my skills in WRITING: 1=Not at all----4=A lot

3. Because of PREP class, I am improving my skills in READING: 1=Not at all----4=A lot

4. Because of PREP class, I am improving my skills in ORGANIZATION: 1=Not at all----4=A lot

5. Because of PREP class, I am improving my skills in WORKING WITH OTHERS: 1=Not at all----4=A lot

6. Because of PREP class, I am improving my skills in WORKING INDEPENDENTLY: 1=Not at all----4=A lot

7. Because of PREP class, I am improving my skills in STUDY HABIT skills: 1=Not at all----4=A lot

8. Because of PREP class, I am improving my skills in ASKING FOR HELP: 1=Not at all----4=A lot

9. Because of PREP class, I am improving my skills in SETTING AND ACCOMPLISHING GOALS: 1=Not at all----4=A lot

10. Because of PREP class, I am improving my skills in MANAGING MY EMOTIONS: 1=Not at all----4=A lot
11. Because of PREP class, I am improving my skills in RESOLVING CONFLICT:
   1=Not at all-----4=A lot

12. Because of PREP class, I am improving my skills in PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE: 1=Not at all-----4=A lot

13. I am developing academic skills in PREP class
   a. Strongly disagree b. Disagree c. Agree d. Strongly agree

14. I am developing social/emotional skills in PREP class
   a. Strongly disagree b. Disagree c. Agree d. Strongly agree

15. I feel safe and supported in PREP class
   a. Strongly disagree b. Disagree c. Agree d. Strongly agree

16. My PREP teacher cares about me as a student and an individual
   a. Strongly disagree b. Disagree c. Agree d. Strongly agree

17. Any other feedback you would like to give about the PREP class? (optional, long answer)
Appendix B-Student Survey #2

1. PREP class helped me improve these skills this year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>A lot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working independently</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Habits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking for help/Self Advocacy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting and accomplishing goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing my emotions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolving conflicts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning for the future</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. I wish PREP class had helped me develop more skills in: (short answer)

3. PREP class has helped me: Check all that apply
   a. Prepare for high school success
   b. Plan for my college and career future
c. Build or develop my academic skills

d. Build or develop my social skills

4. PREP class has been a safe and supportive community for me.

   a. A lot
   b. A little
   c. Not at all

5. If PREP class were offered in 10th grade, I would take it

   a. Definitely
   b. Maybe
   c. no

6. Any other feedback you would like to give about PREP class? (long answer)
Appendix C-Teacher Survey

1. How has your understanding of the PREP curriculum changed since the beginning of the year? (long answer)

2. In general, PREP students are improving their academic skills in the following areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>A lot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Managing my emotions</td>
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<td>Planning for the future</td>
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3. How can the PREP class/curriculum be improved to support student learning? (long answer)

4. How can the PREP class/curriculum be improved to support your content curriculum? (long answer)

5. PREP class has helped students: Check all that apply
   
   e. Prepare for high school success
   
   f. Plan for my college and career future
   
   g. Build or develop my academic skills
   
   h. Build or develop my social skills

6. I would recommend PREP class to incoming 9th graders
   
   a. Strongly agree
   
   b. Agree
   
   c. Disagree
   
   d. Strongly disagree

7. Any other feedback you would like to provide about PREP class/curriculum? (optional, long answer)
Appendix D - Student Interview Questions

1. What academic skills do you feel you got better at as a result of taking the PREP class?
2. What academic skills do you wish PREP class had helped you get better at?
3. What learning activities, lessons or units that you did in PREP class were especially helpful for your academic progress?
4. What academic strategies that you learned in PREP class do you continue to use? How do they help you be successful?
5. What social skills do you feel you got better at as a result of taking the PREP class?
6. What social skills do you wish PREP class had helped you get better at?
7. What learning activities, lessons or units that you did in PREP class were especially helpful for your social or emotional progress?
8. What social or emotional strategies that you learned in PREP class do you continue to use? How do they help you be successful?
9. What are the best parts about the PREP class?
10. What would make the PREP class even better?
11. Did the PREP class help prepare you to be academically successful? Why/why not?
12. Did the PREP class help you prepare to be socially or emotionally successful? Why/why not?
13. Did the PREP class help you prepare for your future beyond high school?

Why/why not?
Appendix E-Teacher Interview Questions

1. What academic skills do you believe students developed as a result of being in the PREP class?

2. What academic skills does/did the PREP class not prepare students for?

3. What academic skills have you seen students use that they developed in PREP class?

4. What social/emotional skills do you believe students developed as a result of being in the PREP class?

5. What social/emotional skills does/did PREP class not prepare students for?

6. What social/emotional skills have you seen students use that they developed in PREP class?

7. Do you think the PREP class helps students prepare for college or careers?
   Why/why not?

8. What are the benefits of the PREP class?

9. What is missing from the PREP class content or curriculum that could make it better?