The making of sophomores:
Student, parent, and teacher reactions in the context of
systemic urban high school reform

Nancy C. Patterson, Ph. D., Bowling Green State University
419/372-9379
419/372-3998 FAX
ncpatte@bgsu.edu

Svetlana A. Beltyukova, Ph. D., University of Toledo
419/530-4204
419/530-8447 FAX
sbeltyu@pop3.utoledo.edu

Karen Berman, Toledo Public Schools
419/691-4687
419/697-2511 FAX
kab.jam@buckeye-express.com

Anthony Francis, Toledo Public Schools
419/691-4687
419/697-2511 FAX
sheeptuf@hotmail.com
419/691-4687

September, 2006
Abstract

America’s urban high schools are having trouble making sophomores, resulting in freshmen classes bulging with students repeating a grade. Research shows that these students are at high risk of failure and dropout. Urban districts have begun to respond to the notable “freshmen bulge” through school restructuring. This mixed-methods study examines first steps taken by one urban high school in Ohio to address the challenges of high levels of freshmen failure through a small schools model. The authors discuss freshman student, parent, and teacher reactions to a pilot program designed expressly for the making of sophomores.
The making of sophomores:

Student, parent, and teacher reactions in the context of systemic urban high school reform

America’s urban high schools are having trouble making sophomores. The freshman year experience has been highlighted as pivotal—as the “make it or break it year” (Black, 2004), given the infirm grasp many students have on the transition from junior high or middle school to high school (Editorial Projects in Education [EPE], 2006; Beldon, Rosanello, & Stewart, 2004). Phenomenal student dropout and repeater rates over the transitional year from 9th to 10th grade indicate the critical nature of this slice of American adolescent life that has been variously described as a “holding tank” for high schools (Herzog & Morgan, 1998), and “the grade 9 valve in the education pipeline. Nationally, more than one third of students lost from the national pipeline fail to make the transition from 9th to 10th grade (EPE, 2006, p. 16). Indeed, “the freshman bulge” refers not to expanding youth waistlines, but rather to the swelling size of freshman classes. Unfortunately the loss is hitting urban districts hardest. A recent report states that the rate of student loss during the freshmen year is more than 40% in high-poverty districts, compared with 27% in low-poverty settings (EPE, 2006, p. 16). The ranks of freshman classes in these districts are double or triple the size of sophomore, junior, and senior classes, indicating that many students are being retained due to the necessity of repeating a grade.

Research shows that the danger in this state of affairs is the likelihood that students who fail their freshman year are at high risk of not graduating. A study of 450 Mid-western high schools and their junior high feeder patterns shows that “failing 9th grade spells doom for as many as 25% of ninth-graders” (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998).
Furthermore, the profile of high school dropouts is a bleak tale of poverty and crime. Jay Smink, director of the National Dropout Prevention Center, and his co-author Frank Schargel state, “America’s dropout problem is costly to the individual, to business, and to society” (Schargel & Smink, 2001, p. 3). Students who don’t finish high school are four times more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed. They are far more likely to end up in prison (Haney, 2003) or on welfare, and they die, on average, at a much younger age. In 2003, high school graduates earned 30% more than those without a diploma, and those with a college degree earned 132% more (Olsen, 2006). In fact, the likelihood of slipping into poverty is about three times higher for dropouts than it is for high school graduates (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1998).

The dilemma of high school dropouts persists in an age of increasing accountability for Americas high schools. No Child Left Behind has required each state to set graduation rate targets, with 100% by the year 2014. Ohio’s target for the 2005-2005 year is 76.3% (EPE, 2006). The growing restrictions that are squeezing students out of the educational pipeline at this critical juncture have motivated educators to learn about and attend to the unique needs of freshman and the hazards associated with their transition from middle school to high school. Urban districts have begun to respond to the notable closing of the “grade 9 valve” through school restructuring. This paper examines first steps taken by one urban high school in Ohio to address the challenges of high levels of student attrition, low graduation rate, and “the freshman bulge” through a small schools model. The authors discuss freshman student, parent, and teacher reactions to a pilot program designed expressly for the making of sophomores.
Literature review

Anatomy of a dropout. The data continue to add up to a negative sum total of the high school freshman experience. Hertzog & Morgan (1996) have repeatedly found the experiences of students moving from middle to high school grades to be particularly trying, leading to low self-perception, academic failure, and dropout. Researchers have also explored the complexity of issues around dropouts, including factors linked to high dropout rates, reasons dropouts give for quitting, and the unique developmental needs of freshmen.

Identifying risk factors and predicting who will drop out presents a complex puzzle. While “certain social, economic, ethnic, or racial characteristics increase the statistical likelihood that students will drop out, nobody can predict with any degree of certainty that particular students who have these characteristics will drop out, or that others who do not fit the profile will not” (Schargel & Smink, 2001, p. 23). The most commonly-cited risk factors are single-parent family status, family income under $15,000, lack of family history of high school graduates, history of sibling dropout, and limited English proficiency.

The manner in which students make this transition between the middle level school and the high school has been seen as a predictor of student success in grade 9 and an indicator of drop out. In a study on student transition, Hertzog & Morgan (1996) found that high schools with minimal or no transition programs (two or less transition practices for eighth grade /ninth grade students at the middle and high school level) reported a retention/failure rate in grade 9 as high as 40 percent. Furthermore, the researchers found a positive relationship between the degree of implementation of transition program practices and the rates of decrease in student retention and dropout for both male and female students.
An important factor linked to dropout rates is high retention rates, or failure of the ninth grade. In focus group discussions with educators in several of the schools with high retention rates, the educators indicated the incoming students were unprepared for the rigors of the high school subjects. According to recent statistics on student in-grade retention, those students who have been retained once have reduced their chances for graduation to 50-50, while those who have been retained twice are given less than a 25 percent chance of successfully completing high school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1996).

Recent data from the state of Ohio show that economic status is closely related to academic success for high school students. Ohio’s economically disadvantaged youth had a 58.5% passage rate on all portions of the 9th grade proficiency test compared to an 83% passage rate for non-disadvantaged students. At-risk youth such as these represent majority populations in Ohio’s urban school districts (Beldon, Rosanello, & Stewart, 2004). It is no surprise that, given the dismal academic success rate of urban freshman combined with the tenuous social dynamics of the freshman year, we are losing students at alarming rates.

Unique needs of transitioning teens. What might explain problems with failure and dropout rates, particularly among our freshmen? In a 1990 US Department of Education survey of 10th grade dropouts, the top reason for both young women and men was that they simply did not like school. Top responses for both young men and women were poor academic performance and inability to keep up with schoolwork.

One researcher (Fine, 1991) has pushed further, digging deeper into dropout profiles, exploring teen struggles with social and academic failure that predict dropout. In contrasting “dropouts” with “stayins” on levels of psychological depression, attributions for academic
success and failure, perspectives on social injustice, reactions to classroom inequity, and degree of social conformity,” she found that her notions of what constituted a dropout were “uncomfortably disrupted,” and has “recast dropping out as a strategy for taking control of lives fundamentally out of control (pp. 3-4). It is her argument that urban high school students are being silenced and pushed out, and this number is tallied in the school’s dropout rate. She and other have found that “it is often the academic critic resisting the intellectual and political girdles who drops out or who is pushed out of low-income schools” (see Fine, 1991, p. 50).

It is evident in the literature that high school students value having a voice in their schools, having relationships that make them feel a part of their school community. When students were asked in one study to rate the areas that were most important to them in making the transition to high school, the only significant finding was an increase in the importance of developing close friendships (Hertzog & Morgan, 1996). Kathleen Cushman (2003) has been in close conversation with high school students. Her recently published book-- *Fires in the bathroom: Advice for teachers from high school students*-- offers up their voices. The most surprising finding from her year-long interaction with over forty urban high school students was that students preferred to talk about teacher-student relationships—about respect, trust and fairness—over curriculum and assessment. They were concerned about the quality of their interactions.

In focus groups with Ohio high school dropouts, researchers found similar results. Young adults in Ohio repeatedly cited the need for more adults—such as guidance counselors, teachers, and staff—to take an interest in their education and lives. They identified the socialization function of high school as critical, citing instances where negative interactions with teachers
and/or administrators were the deciding factor for leaving school. Many reported that when they were accepted by their peers and having fun, when their teachers respected them, then and only then did they want to be in school and succeed (Beldon, Russonello, & Stewart, 2004). Some studies have suggested that active mentorship significantly addresses some of these persistent problems. It has a long and proven history. Comprehensive studies of mentor programs such as Big Brother/Big Sister (see Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995) show improvements in self-esteem, grades, and school attendance; reduced substance abuse; and better family relationships, to name only a few.

Adolescents during this critical developmental stage—the transition to adult life—require above all a sense of belonging and control over their new environment, and it appears that, while the factors affecting dropout are numerous and complex, these young adults are most concerned about and could most benefit from dependable relationships with adults, particularly at school. The unfortunate reality is an apparent mismatch between policy and practices in meeting 9th-graders’ needs, due to large impersonal environments that are overly competitive, fast-paced, and overcrowded.

Freshman students complain of tedium, confusing schedules, overly-challenging workloads, and uncaring, inhospitable, and indifferent teachers (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Wheelock, 1993). The fact that so many students share the experience of not being able to relate to or be understood by their teachers points to a persistent divide that pits students and teachers against each other. It is the underlying culture of silencing, where muting student voices is a metaphor for “the structural, ideological, and practical organization of comprehensive high schools” (Fine, 1991, p. 61).
**The small school response.** For many urban school districts, the response to the dehumanizing condition of the large urban high school has been the creation of smaller learning communities (SLC). The impressive benefits of SLCs have been well-established in the literature, with increasing examples of success across the country (Darling-Hammond, 2002, 1997; Cotton, 2001). Hundreds of SLCs have been created in urban areas, including Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Ohio. Small school researchers are careful to assert, however, that shrinking the size of schools is not a panacea; rather, smaller environments make it easier to give kids the things they really need to succeed: collegiality among teachers, personalized teacher-student relationships, and less differentiation of instruction by ability (Cotton, 2001; Raywid, M., 1999; Gladden, 1998).

**Methods**

*The study.* The following is a comparative case study of a pilot program undertaken at a large high school in a Mid-western urban school district. From a population of all freshmen Algebra I students a group of fifty incoming freshman were randomly selected to participate in a pilot Freshman Academy structured along the principles of SLCs. For the duration of their freshman year, students spent the entire school day with their cohort of fifty and shared the same four core teachers and the same gym teacher. Those remaining in the population comprised the comparison group. The student-teacher ratio, established by the teachers’ union, was comparable across pilot and comparison groups. The questions undertaken by researchers included: 1) Were there any differences between the Freshman Academy and control group students with regard to student attendance, discipline, and academic performance? 2) What strengths and weaknesses
did Academy students, parents, and teachers identify regarding the experience? and 3) how do
the reactions to the Freshman Academy experience of students, parents, and teachers compare?

Case study analysis (Merriam, 1998) allowed the authors to evaluate the Freshman
Academy program in its real-life context, relying on multiple sources of data that describe the
Academy experience (Yin, 1994). To answer the research questions, a mixed design was used,
whereby demographic and survey data for both groups were collected along with qualitative data
from the pilot group to develop a rich case study. Multiple sources of data allowed for
triangulation (Singleton & Straits, 1999), and student, parent, and teacher responses were
integrated with quantitative findings.

*Theoretical framework.* Two constructs guide this study, one theoretical and one
operational. Underlying the design of the pilot program are the notions of valuing student voice
and providing spaces for student academic and social success. We strove to provide the antidote
to what Fine (1991) called “the privileging of noncritical voices and the training of students
within the seamless echoes of hegemony” (p. 222)—the antithesis of silencing. I view of
democratizing their classrooms, we sought a structure that would allow for increased
opportunities for building teacher-to-student and student-to-teacher trust. Cotton’s 2001 literature
review on the benefits of SLCs provided an appropriate context for understanding the main
constituents’ reactions to this pilot program and gave us our operational structure by which to
evaluate the data. The presence of smaller learning communities has been shown to produce a
variety of highly desirable outcomes, including stronger feelings of affiliation and belonging,
greater presence of safety and order, higher attendance and graduation rates, increased parent
involvement and satisfaction, increased teacher involvement and satisfaction, more strongly integrated and aligned curriculum, and higher achievement levels.

Data collection and variables. Data were collected from multiple sources, including school and district demographic data, field notes, interviews, surveys, and focus groups. Demographic, achievement, attendance and discipline data were available for 43 Freshman Academy students and 150 students in the control group. The demographic variables analyzed in the study included student gender and race. Student achievement was measured by student G.P.A. in each quarter in core subject areas represented by courses such as Algebra 1, English 1, Science General, and World Studies. Attendance was measured by the total number of unexcused absences. Two discipline variables included in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Additionally, 40 Freshman Academy students (93%) and 66 control group students (44%) responded to the Survey of Classroom Environment. This survey asked questions about student attitudes toward school and learning and their relationships with teachers and peers on a Likert scale from 1 to 5.

To understand student and teacher reactions to the Freshman Academy experience, researchers conducted focus groups with all four teachers and two groups of randomly-selected Freshman Academy students at the end of the year. Sample questions included: How has the Freshman Academy experience affected you as a student or teacher? What improvements would you make to the Freshman Academy? What were the most rewarding and frustrating experiences? Students were also surveyed in writing. Parent reactions were recorded in a written survey. They were asked about their perceptions of their child’s performance as well as about the accessibility of teachers. Student and teacher focus group responses were transcribed and coded.
Data Analysis. Descriptive as well as inferential statistical procedures were applied to examine differences between the two groups in achievement, attendance, suspension, and perceptions of school environment. Two-way Analyses of Variance were performed to examine differences in attendance and suspensions by group membership (Academy vs. control group) and gender. Additionally, repeated measured ANOVA tests were performed to examine changes in student achievement. Differences by race/ethnicity could not be analyzed due to the insufficient group sizes. Survey data were examined by computing percentages of students responding to each question and testing significance of differences using chi-square test of independence.

The thematic analysis of qualitative data (focus groups) was conducted according to constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), such that as the data were read, discrete categories were generated, and with each subsequent reading of the data, categories were further defined as examples from the data accumulated and were categorized. Initial readings of the data were conducted with Cotton’s (2001) criteria in mind (feelings of affiliation and belonging, greater presence of safety and order, higher attendance and graduation rates, increased parent involvement and satisfaction, increased teacher involvement and satisfaction, more strongly integrated and aligned curriculum, and higher achievement levels), and a modified framework emerged. Evidence of increased parent and teacher satisfaction was infused throughout the other four categories, and the “graduation rate” element of the “increased attendance and graduation rate” criterion refers only to graduation from freshman to sophomore year. Quantitative and qualitative data were then woven into a case study that described student, teacher, and parent reactions overall. In the following findings, data were organized and presented for each criterion.
of the model. Quantitative data (in all applicable categories) will be presented first, followed by a presentation of student, teacher, and parent qualitative responses (in all appropriate categories).

Background. At the time of the study, population demographics and poor performance on state report cards made the district under study a prime candidate for reform dollars. Four of the seven high schools rated were in a state of emergency with unusually low graduation rates and low scores on state tests. These four high schools, including the one with which we are concerned (we will call it Morrison High School), are currently undergoing full-scale small school reform.

Morrison is a Mid-western community school of approximately 1300 students located in an urban area with a population of around 300,000. The staff at Morrison as well as the community are proud of the tradition that generations of young people graduate from Morrison and continue to live and work in the community. In fact, roughly 20% of Morrison’s staff is composed of its own graduates. The high school is located in a traditional eastern European immigrant community whose population has diversified over the years. Thirty-five percent of students are economically disadvantaged according to state reporting, and the student body is 67.4% Caucasian, 17.5% African-American, and 14.3% Hispanic. Over the past decade, Morrison has had persistent attendance problems with graduation rates consistently under 60% or lower (see Table 1), significantly below Ohio’s 2006 graduation rate of 76.3% (EPE Research Center). At the time of this study, it ranked fifth out of the eight district high schools in percentage of students attending on a daily basis and number of suspensions. It also has discipline problems, as indicated by consistently high suspension rates (see Table 2).
The statistics for Morrison freshmen in this context are noteworthy, given the predictions in the literature. From 1998 to 2003, 60.9% of those suspended were freshmen, and 76.6% of those expelled were freshmen. Morrison has instituted a lock-out policy to address disruptions caused by tardiness, whereby late students may not enter class. Fifty-eight percent of all lock-out students were freshmen. The “freshman bulge” is substantial at Morrison, so that the freshman class of 2004 numbered 645, comprised of 419 new freshmen and 226 repeaters. This trend has been on-going over the past five years (Table 3).

**GEAR UP in full swing.** The reform effort to address these issues at Morrison has been undertaken with great enthusiasm by a growing number of staff, given the persistent disturbing numbers and academic emergency status. The effort is funded by a federal grant through Gaining Early Awareness for Readiness in Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), the focus of which is to ensure that all students have post-secondary options. The process for Morrison began five years ago as a university/school district collaboration with the junior high school in Morrison’s feeder pattern. From the beginning of the effort, teachers were given leading roles and university staff acted as consultants. At both the high school and the junior high, the process began with an on-site professional development course that focused on the research around SLCs.

A university/school district collaboration was formed in 2000, with the first cohort of students at the junior high. Programming began at the high school in 2002, when these students became freshmen. At the time of this writing, Morrison was entering its third year of the process (2004), having undergone two years of professional development, gradual staff buy-in, and planning. Initially, 40 out of 85 teachers participated in the professional development classes, and by the end on the second year, 75% of the staff was involved in some way. The professional
development class produced interest-based work groups that eventually evolved into a semi-formal structure of network teams. The pilot program that is the subject of this research, the SLC called the Freshman Academy, was planned over the second half of the first year (2002) by an interest-based work group and initiated during the second year (2003).

*The Freshman Academy pilot program.* During the first year of the reform effort, teachers began to consider how changing the structure of their school might impact attendance, academic performance, and graduation rates. The Freshman Academy interest group proposed a small pilot that would involve four core teachers, a physical education teacher, and 50 students. The interest group invited people to participate in the pilot program and was hoping to recruit by interest, but in the end, the four core teachers were selected by seniority. The students were randomly selected from a population of 197 freshman enrolled in basic Algebra, the general track for math. This number did not include repeaters. There was some attrition through student transfers within and out-of-district and one incarceration, so that the final sample consisted of 43 students. Freshman Academy teachers were given a day of professional development training in late summer, and the university provided them with a staff liaison throughout the year as well as a budget for field trips and supplies.

Team scheduling enabled the teachers to have common times for lunch and planning, so that they had opportunities to coordinate their ideas and share topics and themes. During this time, the team discussed class dynamics and problem-solved common concerns; they also established common and consistent disciplinary guidelines that provided opportunities to collaborate. Within these guidelines, they used a tag-team approach to engage with student disciplinary issues.
The structure also allowed for simplified negotiations with parents. Teachers would contact the school counselor, who in turn would contact the parents and arrange a joint meeting with teachers and parents. In contrast to individual parent meetings most common outside the cluster structure, joint meetings (parents and all four cluster teachers) allowed teachers to provide parents with a broader perspective of student issues and reinforce the presence of student issues that were pervasive across all four core courses. Students had some unique opportunities through their involvement with the Academy. The Academy teachers took them on two field trips related to the curriculum—to a science museum and a Renaissance festival. They also offered social events to build rapport within the Academy, such as beginning- and end-of-the-year parent/student/teacher dinners and a pizza party.

**Findings**

*Feelings of affiliation and belonging.* The results of the Classroom Environment survey data analysis show that significantly more Freshman Academy students agreed that they were rarely bored at school (see Table 4, Question 2) and that teachers helped students when they did not understand. Significantly fewer Academy students agreed that teachers blamed students when they did not understand (see Table 4, Question 7). Finally, significantly fewer Academy students disagreed that teachers treated all students respectively (see Table 4, Question 4) and were fair to all students when they broke rules (see Table 4, Question 8).

Students, teachers, and parents alike were most enthusiastic about this characteristic of the Freshman Academy experience. Students in both focus groups continually steered the conversation back to this topic, and teacher and parent responses were equally adamant on the benefits of strong relationships within the Academy. Students in both groups talked about how
being with a smaller group of students helped them negotiate their new environment and make friends easily: “I thought it was easier, kind of, because with the Freshman Academy, we already had all of the same students in all of the classes, so we didn’t have to worry about if we didn’t get along with kids from the other classes. We knew where to go and stuff because everybody had the same classes,” and “I liked it because if I was a regular freshman, I would have to meet new people, and I’m not very good at making new friends or whatever, and in Freshman Academy, I was with my new friends all the time.”

While they seemed to enjoy the closeness, their biggest complaint was the lack of ability to meet other students and being with the same people all day long: “I didn’t really like Freshman Academy, because you were always with the same people and if they got on your nerves, you had the next three classes with the same person.” Both groups stated a desire to have been able to meet students outside their small circle of 43. Toward the middle of the year, students began to feel somewhat isolated and were recommending that teachers find a way to help them meet each other across clusters in the future. Parents and teachers commented on this as well. One teacher commented, “I think there are mixed results. I see that some kids have benefited from it and others—I honestly think they need to be separated.”

Students discussed the importance of having the opportunity to get to know their teachers:

“I think it has helped me a lot, because we got to know our teachers better than most other students did, and we got a relationship with them, so we wouldn’t want to miss school—we’d want to come to school, because we knew that our teachers
cared about us and they expected more from us, and that made it more, like, you wanna get up, you wanna go, because you wanna see your teachers.”

Teacher involvement was critical for these students and appears to have had numerous impacts on their daily lives. One group enjoyed their teacher so much that they passed around a petition to make sure he would be their teacher again the next year. Students in both groups noticed the high standards to which they were all held but seemed to understand and accept these standards as coming from a place of teacher concern about the students themselves. One student was complaining about how hard his social studies class was, but the group countered his complaints with a discussion of how this was important for their success, that their teachers did this because they cared about them.

They seemed to appreciate it that their teachers didn’t give up on them. Students agreed that if they don’t understand something, they are likely to give up: “If I don’t get it the first time, I just give up and forget about it.” They compared teacher responses inside and outside the Academy. One student commented, “Like, other teachers, if you don’t get it, it’s just like, oh, she doesn’t get it, but in Freshman Academy, Mr. Franks, he’ll, like, looks at you, and he knows when you don’t get it, and he’ll try to explain it to you better.” In the same conversation, another student stated,

“Other teachers, like, they want everybody to be on the same page. With some of the students that are in my class, they sit in the back and don’t really know what’s going on, he’ll move them to the front of the class, and then he moved me up and I got a best participation award, so I was doing a lot better. And he treats everybody like that. He doesn’t have favorites. He treats everybody equally;”
and,

“Freshman Academy teachers hear more than other teachers than, like, other classes that I was in. With them teachers, it’s just “do your homework.” They do the work and then go talk on the phone. In the Freshman Academy class, they will give you work and then help you with it. Other teachers just give you work and then sit down.”

Parents, too, noticed the difference in relationships their children had with Freshman Academy teachers and students. In writing about what she felt were major benefits of the Academy, one parent commented on how it seemed like her daughter finally had some teachers she was actually getting to know. Another parent wrote that it seemed like the Freshman Academy teachers and students were coming together like a family.

*Presence of safety and order.* The two-way ANOVA test for in-school suspensions revealed a significant main effect for student participation in the Academy ($F_{1,189} = 16.3, p<.001$). The Academy students, both young men and women, had significantly fewer in-school suspensions than their peers in the control group. The Academy male students had on the average one day of in-school suspensions, while the control group male students had two days of in-school suspensions. The difference for the female students was, on the average, almost 0.5 days for in-school suspensions. The effect size ($R^2$) for in-school suspensions however was small, with the group membership accounting for less than two percent of the variance. There were no significant differences in out-of school suspensions.
The topic of order and discipline was central in both focus groups. Students and teachers agreed that Freshman Academy provided better opportunities for maintaining order and dealing with discipline issues. Students appreciated the fact that they were not sent to the office as frequently. More often than not, if a particular student was having trouble in an Academy class, the teacher had the option to refer that student to another classroom within the Academy. As one student described it, “If you get a referral or something, you don’t have to go to your dean—you just go to one of your teachers, instead of having to get disciplined by the dean.” Students were also aware of the benefit of having teachers communicate regularly about discipline issues, such that, “Knowing your teachers and having them know you makes you behave more, because then you know that if you do something wrong and then they find out, all the teachers know.” In other words, students felt a stronger sense of personal accountability that grew as the year passed and considered it a benefit of the Academy that teachers shared responsibility with discipline.

Teachers were also very positive about the alternatives the Academy structure gave them regarding discipline. One teacher described the change she experienced in these terms:

“My normal way of starting out the year was to get trouble-makers out of the classroom—throw them out, get it over and done with—but I didn’t do that with Freshman Academy kids, because we were working together and we were close. I’m not saying that we don’t have problems ever. I think there’s much more [of] an attitude of “help each one,” rather than in big groups, you know. . ..After the Academy, I think more like, if there’s a problem, solve it with this individual.”

All four teachers were in agreement about improved opportunities to communicate with parents about such issues. They would call the parent in during their
common planning period so that everyone could be present simultaneously with the parent:

“All four of us come in and say ‘this is a problem in all four classes, and we’ve discussed it,’ because typically when we have these meetings, we are seeing negative behavior or grades or whatever across the board, so we’re not bombarding the parents with different bits of information. In the past, parents used to be able to say, ‘well, maybe it’s just a personality conflict, or maybe its just your room,’ so they would talk to the counselor and then make arrangements to have the student pulled to another room or something like that. Now they are not having that option because if they do, that means the kid would be pulled out of four classes. Clearly some responsibility is now being attached to the child.”

Although parents and teachers did not mention safety in their focus groups or surveys, and researchers chose not to discuss it, students did choose to discuss it. “One reason not to like coming here is because of feeling unsafe around certain students. You should always feel safe in school. There’s lots of kids in school who do not feel safe.” This was mentioned, however, by both groups in the context of what was good about the Academy. “I feel safe being in the Freshman Academy. You know everybody,” stated one student, and from a student in the second group, “I think we have it better than the other kids. It’s feels like we have less conflict.”

**Attendance and graduation rates.** The two-way ANOVA test for attendance revealed a significant main effect for student participation in the Academy ($F_{1,189} = 4.6, p<.05$). The Academy students, both boys and girls, had significantly fewer unexcused absences than their
peers in the control group. The Academy male students had on the average two days of unexcused absences, while the control group male students missed on the average almost 11 days without an excuse. The difference for the female students was almost five days, on the average. The effect size ($R^2$) for attendance was medium, with the group membership accounting for 8% of the variance in unexcused absences. Freshman Academy promotion rates to 10th grade were significantly higher than those for the comparison group (74.4% compared to 59.3%).

Both students and parents referred to the importance of attendance and how the Freshman Academy experience influenced it: “I think the school would probably be better if they had academies, because you can’t skip no more;” and “I think it’ll help dropout rates and all that, because if you skip one class and then go to the next, they’re like ‘oh, where were you last period,’ and nobody likes to get put out like that, so they show up.” One student commented on how her father had noticed a change in her, that she really liked getting up and going to school. Academy teachers noticed improvement in attendance. They actually compiled a set of statistics on Freshman Academy to share with parents at an end-of-the-year meeting that they compared Academy: 25.6% were not promoted; 74.4% were promoted; control: 34.7% were not promoted; 59.3% were promoted; 6% unknown with attendance statistics in the general population of freshmen.

*Curriculum integration and alignment.* Students and teachers noticed the benefits of interdisciplinary planning. Students were aware of and appreciated the fact that their teachers worked together on certain assignments and curriculum. “We benefit because they all have the same plan, and they talk to each other, and they have, like, meetings and stuff during lunch and they know what they are doing—what the other teacher’s doing,” The students felt like it was
easier to learn when teachers collaborated, for example, during a unit on revolution: “Like
*Animal Farm* and the Russian Revolution—they were doing both of these at the same time in
English and social studies, so it’s easier to understand,” or ” In social studies they were teaching
the Renaissance, and in Language Arts we’d read a book [*Romeo and Juliet*] on the
Renaissance.”

One teacher’s comments reinforce this in her statement that,

> “I can speak for intellectual growth. . ..I definitely think they understand now how
> the curriculum goes hand-in-hand, and in terms of the kinds of concepts that we
> work on, they’re definitely transferring information from one class to the other,
> and they’ll go “yeah, we worked on that in Mr. F.’s class” and they can definitely
> see the relevance in English to Social studies.”

*Achievement levels.* The repeated measures ANOVA tests of the differences by
achievement (see Table 5) revealed that, on the average, science G.P.A. (measured on a scale
from 0 to 4) of the Academy students was higher compared to the control group (1.67 and 1.23
respectively). There was also a significant interaction between student G.P.A. in science and
group membership, meaning that the achievement of the Academy students dropped
considerably by the end of the year (from the average of 1.82 in the first three quarters to 1.22 in
the last quarter) while the science G.P.A. of the control group students remained almost the
same across all four quarters (1.26). There was also a significant main effect for group
membership for social studies (see Table 5). Unlike hypothesized, the average G.P.A. of the
students in the control group was significantly higher compared to the Academy students (1.79
and 1.09 respectively). There were no significant differences in English and math. These findings
should be considered in the context of higher standards in place this year as teachers and 10th grade students face a new state graduation test.

Student, teacher, and parent comments related to academics were positive. Students reported that being in the Academy helped them do better in school because they got individualized support. One student pointed out that her mother could see she was doing better than her brothers and sisters. Both groups of students discussed the value of teachers persistently working with them: “They work with you. They don’t let you give up. They push you.” Several felt like they had learned more this year than last year. One Academy teacher was enthusiastic about the improvement she saw, stating, “I have seen improvement. In past years, I’ve gone a whole year and not seen actual improvement in certain kids.” One parent reported that her daughter’s grades improved and she seemed to be enjoying the projects and reports she was asked to do.

Conclusion

This study bears out Cotton’s (2001) review of SLC literature. Across all categories, responses were positive for students, teachers, and parents. In all categories where there was data available, parent and teacher feedback corroborated student responses. In all cases where criteria were not discussed among students, teachers, and parents alike, quantitative data corroborated a positive finding for that criterion. For example, while parents did not mention safety and order, the quantitative analysis shows that in fact, discipline problems were far fewer.

The energy with which students, teachers, and parents emphasized the importance of student/teacher relationships in Freshman Academy mirrors top reasons dropouts give for not staying in school, that is, simply not liking school, struggling with poor academic performance,
and feeling disenfranchised and unable to relate to teachers (NCES, 1990). Not only do students show a greater sense of affiliation and belonging, their parents and teachers verify that this is a strength of the new structure. It is notable that students felt safer in the Academy, perhaps a factor that influenced their improved attendance. These numbers are validated by parents who noticed a change in their child’s attitude toward school. Perhaps improved attendance contributed to student and parent awareness of the curriculum, such that both groups identified the integrated nature of the curriculum as a strength. It is apparent from previous studies as well as in the findings here that relationships are the first step in creating a successful high school experience for freshmen—relationships across the many stakeholders in a young person’s first year—students, teachers, and parents.

The future for Morrison High School

The power of possibility in positive relationships offers at least the promise of getting kids to show up, and the further possibility of encouraging their membership in a community of learners. We hope in future years to see significant improvements in not only attendance, but discipline and academics as well. As for the current status at Morrison High, the teachers’ union recently called for a vote on the teacher-created proposal, requiring 75% approval of the staff for passage. The proposal recommended creating an SLC model that included core-course clustering of staff and looping of freshman and sophomore students. Of those who voted (87% of teaching staff), 84% voted in favor.

While the favorable vote was a true end-of-year motivator, the year leading up to it was far from perfect. Academy teachers struggled with buy-in of all partners involved. They felt inadequately prepared and under-trained, and were perpetually struggling with lack of planning
time to fulfill the role they were assigned. As they face a new year in their newly-structured high school, they are optimistic. They see themselves much more enthusiastic about team planning than they did at the beginning of the pilot program. They are convinced that concerns Academy students had about feeling isolated from their non-clustered peers will be somewhat mediated this year, given the fact that the new structure clusters all freshman and sophomore students. One teacher stated with great conviction, “we are no longer interested in teaching in isolation,” having experienced the benefits for herself and her students of team planning. Understanding the preventative measure that clustering offers to isolation and burnout, they hope for the new cluster teachers that they will see these benefits as well, that people will be involved in new ways with people they have never met, that more doors will open. “We are building relationships—we really are,” she stated, as she considered the past and looked toward the new year. They predict students will have closer relationships with teachers, improving attendance across the board. They are attracted by the notion of building a high school community with adults who are respectful and caring in a rigorous academic environment. They have high expectations that the making of sophomores can become much less a problem and more of a phenomenon, built on enduring relationships.
Bibliography


Beldon, Rosanello, & Stewart. (2004). *Ohioans consider the state of their high schools and efforts to improve high school*. Columbus, OH: Ohio Department of Education.


Prison Pipeline Conference, Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University; Northeastern University: Institute on Race and Justice.


Table 1

*History of Graduation Rates*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Five-year History of Suspensions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1999-00</th>
<th>2000-01</th>
<th>2001-02</th>
<th>2002-03</th>
<th>2003-04</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students Suspended</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Suspensions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

*Numbers of Repeaters, True Sophomores, and Percentage that are Repeaters, 2001-2004*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Repeaters</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>True Sophomores</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Repeaters</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

Summary of Student Perceptions of School and Classroom Environment (in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Academy</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Not Sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Teachers give me feedback often.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I am rarely bored in school.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teachers frequently review material.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Teachers treat all students respectfully.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I feel comfortable asking for help when I don't understand.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I feel comfortable asking for help with a personal problem.</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Teachers help students when they do not understand.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. My teachers are fair to all students when they break rules.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

Summary of Significant Results of the Analysis of Variance for Student Achievement by Quarters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between subjects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups (Academy vs. control)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.93</td>
<td>13.93</td>
<td>3.97*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>280.60</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Subjects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group by time</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.23</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>7.60***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>107.73</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between subjects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups (Academy vs. control)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>36.34</td>
<td>36.34</td>
<td>9.16**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>107.73</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>325.28</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
* p<.05. ** p<.01. *** p<.001