

North Carolina Freshmen Academy Principals' and Counselors' Perceptions of the Social Educational Issues Impacting Students' Academic Success

Fannie Ratliff, EdD
Anson County Public Schools
Wadesboro, NC

Linda Wilson-Jones, PhD
Associate Professor and Director of the Doctoral Program
Fayetteville State University
Fayetteville, NC

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the differences, if any, between North Carolina freshmen academy principals' and counselors' perceptions of the social and educational issues impacting students' academic success. The results of this study provided additional knowledge to educational administrators, policymakers, and district leaders, as they develop effective educational initiatives to accommodate the transition of ninth-grade students. Although, research was found on principals' perceptions of their freshmen academy, there was limited research on counselors' perceptions. With this in mind, it was necessary to include counselors' perceptions, since they are leaders in the school reform initiatives of a school. Based on the reoccurring responses, two themes emerged: (a) student-centered environment and (b) freshman academy success. It was recommended that future studies be conducted to include all stakeholders in the school system, such as, students, teachers, and parents to determine whether they would have the same viewpoints about ninth grade transitions programs as the participants in this study. Also, it was recommended that this study be replicated using a larger populations to see if the results would be similar to the findings from this study.

In addressing the problem of losing a large numbers of ninth graders and noting that the freshman year is the most important year in high school, school district leaders are charged to develop new programs to improve their schools. Subsequently, one such program is the smaller learning communities, particularly the freshman academy. Along with many high schools across the nation, North Carolina is consistently confronted with societal, academic, and the performance struggles of its ninth-grade students.

Consequently, ninth grade, the first year of high school, is often perceived as a challenging time that presents many issues for adolescents (Kerr, 2002; Black, 2004). Ascher (1987) suggested that students are confronted with academic, procedural, and social challenges during this transitional period. As a result, ninth graders have (a) higher numbers of failures, (b) more repeaters, (c) more disciplinary infractions, (d) lower attendance rates, (e) lower rate of academic success, (f) higher rates of dropouts, and (g) lower sense of attachment (Reents, 2002).

The Southern Regional Education Board (2002) referred to the freshman year of high school as a holding tank; this was based on research that found ninth-grade failure rates appeared higher than other secondary grade levels (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). In other words, an increasing number of students are retained in the ninth grade. For this reason, the ninth-grade year is identified as being the pivotal grade for educators and has been deemed the most critical year of high school. The ninth grade year is considered the “make-it or break-it-year” for students once they are on the track to graduate (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; and this grade often determines the success or failure of students’ throughout their entire high school career (Reinhard, 1997).

Research on high school reform research suggest that secondary schools must change the way they conduct business to ensure that ninth graders are successful in their freshman year and high school careers (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg 2001). Kerr (2002) further agreed that high schools must give more attention to programs and practices that focus attention on the unique needs of ninth-grade adolescents. Wise (2008) suggested that over a million high school students drop out of school every year, and in general, about 7,000 students drop out of school each day. According to North Carolina’s statistics, only 68.1 percent of students who entered ninth grade in the fall of 2003, graduated from high school in 2007; and 70.3 percent of the students who entered ninth grade in the fall of 2004 graduated from high school in 2008. It is for those reasons that both state and federal legislations mandate educators’ increase expectations on educational accountability for the success of all children; therefore, implementing better academic competencies for all students becomes essential for educational reform.

A study conducted at Boston College reported that North Carolina annually retains about fifteen percent of its ninth graders (Jonsson, 2004). The research found a connection between ninth-grade retention and the dropout rate, and showed 1 out of 5 students failed to return to complete their tenth grade-year of school. Additionally, Silberman (2004) cited North Carolina as having one of the nation’s worst attrition rates among the 50 states. Schulte (2002) further indicated a direct association between a student’s success in the ninth grade and graduation rates. In other words, if adolescents have a successful ninth-grade year, it is more likely they will enjoy their high school experience and graduate. However, the contrary is also true, when adolescents have unfavorable experiences during their ninth-grade year; it is at this time they either consciously or subconsciously make the decision to drop out.

Results from Purvey and Smith’s (1983) study conducted over twenty years ago, indicated that effective schools with high student performance was largely due to leadership practices, regardless to the social economics and other demographics of students. This was supported by Cotton’s (2000) research that indicated schools with high levels of student achievement had stronger administrative leadership. The visibility and

accessibility of the school leadership team was noted as a key feature of an effective school environment (Cotton, 2000). Therefore, it is obvious that leadership is critical to school reform and recent research demonstrates a direct relationship between leadership and student achievement (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Accordingly, school administrators have the capability to enhance the teaching and learning of all children and are influential to the success or failure of reform initiatives, such as the freshman or ninth-grade academy. Therefore, it is essential that the school principal and counselor work together to improve the social and educational growth of students. In essence, school counselors and school leaders, are influential partners who advocate and provide support for the success of all students. Therefore, research for the implementation of strategies to help students achieve academically during the transition to ninth-grade year is necessary to eliminate behavior and other issues associated with the transitional year.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the differences, if any, between North Carolina freshmen academy principals' and counselors' perceptions of the social and educational issues impacting students' academic success. This study was guided by the following research question: What are the challenges and obstacles faced by students, faculty, and administration since the implementation of the freshman academy?

Methodology

This qualitative study was limited to North Carolina public high schools with freshman or ninth-grade academies. The rationale for using a qualitative approach was to capture the perceptions of freshman academy principals' and counselors' experiences of the challenges and obstacles faced since the implementation of their academy. A web-based survey, The Freshman Academy Principal/Counselor Survey was distributed electronically to 103 high school principals and 103 high school counselors in North Carolina whose school had a freshman or ninth-grade academy during the 2008-2009 school year. Responses to the open-ended questions were interpreted and coded for patterns and reoccurring themes. Based on the patterns and reoccurring responses, the following emerging themes were generated: (a) student-centered environment and (b) freshman academy success.

Results of the Study

Findings from the open-ended questions involving the participants' perceptions of challenges and obstacles they have encountered since the implementation of their freshman academy revealed that the majority of the problems focused on school culture and climate issues and staff concerns. These findings are congruent with the literature on

problems associated with the implementation of small learning communities. The academy principals and counselors felt that the freshman academy concept lost some of its cohesiveness and continuity due to the constant overwhelming turnover of teachers and administrators who became disgruntled and left. In addition, there was a lack of respect from teachers and staff in the regular high school setting toward the academy teachers and staff. Other findings indicated that teachers felt they were at a disadvantage and lacked sufficient professional development which caused them to feel incompetent.

Above all, the lack of support from stakeholders was seen as a huge barrier in implementing freshmen academies. As pointed out in the literature review, staff conflicts and turnovers were found to be major challenges to the implementation and survival of small learning communities. In other words, district and building leaders' visions must be evident in order for staff to support new initiatives, such as the freshman academy concept. Program fidelity was also viewed as an obstacle to the freshmen academy. The omission of program fidelity produced negativity in teachers and staff, thus hindering the anticipated success of the program. Additionally, the location of the academy and lack of proximity to other teachers' classrooms created issues regarding collaboration among teachers.

Another major concern mentioned was parental involvement. Principals and counselors felt that the lack of parental involvement impeded students' achievement. Mizelle and Irvin (2000) suggested that parental involvement was one of the most important links to increasing students' academic achievement. It was interesting to note that researchers, McAndrews and Anderson (2002) found that success and failure of small learning communities was contingent on the support and commitment from all levels of stakeholders.

This study further found that several principals and counselors reported that although they were in the first year of implementing their academy, they believed that the academy would have a positive impact on ninth-grade students' academic achievement and outcomes. For example, as one counselor pointed out, "Although this is our first year I feel that we will have a decrease in absenteeism, improved test scores and grades when we compare to previous years. Participants were asked to report problems their schools experienced prior to the implementation of their academies, both principals and counselors indicated that multiple discipline infractions were perceived as the leading problem in their schools prior to the implementation of their freshmen academy. This finding is congruent with the literature review on ninth graders, indicating that among high school students, ninth-grade students have the highest number of discipline referrals (Reents, 2002).

Furthermore, the ninth-grade year has been noted as being one of the most critical years of high school and is referred as the "make-or-break year" because it sets the tone for students' entire high school career (Black, 2004, Reents, 2002, Reinhard, 1997). Freshman academy principals and counselors, for the most part, perceived (a) low income student performance, (b) high dropout rates, (c) high absence rates, (d) high retention rates, and (e) low parental involvement, as being the most common problems experienced by their schools prior to the implementation of their academies. Furthermore, researchers have noted that prior to the implementation of freshmen academies, ninth graders, of all secondary grade levels, had the highest dropout rates, retention rates, course failures,

greatest discipline referrals, lowest grade-point-averages, attendance rates, and tardy rates (Black, 2004; Reents, 2002; Walsh, 2002).

References

- Allensworth, E., & Easton, J. (2007). *What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago Public High Schools: A close look at course grades, failures, and attendance in the freshman year* [Research rep.]. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research. Retrieved from http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub_id=116
- Ascher, C. (1987). *The ninth grade-A precarious time for the potential dropout*. Retrieved from <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-926/ninth.htm>
- Black, S. (2004). *The pivotal year: Rough transitions can make ninth grade little more than a holding tank for high school*. Retrieved from <http://www.asbj.com/2004/02/0204research.html>
- Cotton, K. (2000). "Summary of findings from the research on school size." A fact sheet prepared for the American Youth Policy Forum Washington, D.C.
- Jonsson, P. (2004). *Ninth grade: A school year to be reckoned with*. Retrieved from <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0316/p01s02-ussc.html>
- Kerr, K. (2002). *Easing the Transition to high school: The effect of school organization on ninth grade success*. (Doctoral dissertation, John Hopkins University, MD). (UMI Proquest Digital Dissertations, AAT 3046584)
- Leithwood, K. A., Seashore-Louis, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation.
- McAndrews, T., & Anderson, W. (2002). *Schools within schools*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, OR: ERIC Digest.
- Mizelle, N. B., & Irvin, J. L., (2000). Transition from middle school into high school. *Middle School Journal*, 31(5), 57-61.
- Neild, R., Stoner-Eby, S., & Furstenberg, F., Jr. (2001). *Connecting entrance and departure: The transition to ninth grade and high school dropout*. Paper presented for conference "Dropouts in America: How severe is the problem? What do we know about intervention and prevention?" Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA: Civil Rights Project (January 13, 2001). Retrieved from <http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/dropouts/neild.pdf>
- Purvey, S. C., & Smith, M. S. (1983). *Viewpoints: School leadership in the 21st century: Why and how it is important*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncrel.org/policy/pubs/html/leadership/ontro.html>
- Reents, J. (2002). Isolating 9th graders: Separate schools ease the academic and social transition for high school-bound students. *The School Administrator*, 3, 14-22.
- Reinhard, B. (1997, December). Detroit schools target ninth grade in effort to reduce dropout rate. *Education Week*, 17(15), 1-3.
- Schulte, B. (2002, August 23). *At the 'Academy' breaking down the dropout rate*. The Washington Post Company. Retrieved from <http://www.smallschoolsworkshop.org/bschulte.html>

- Silberman, T. (2004, March). *Ninth grade key to attrition: 'Academies' help curb dropout rate. Bridges 4 kids*. Retrieved from <http://www.bridges4kids.org/articles/3-04/NewsOb3-7-04.html>
- Southern Regional Education Board. (2002). *Opening doors to the future: Preparing low-achieving middle grade students to succeed in high school*. Atlanta, GA: Author.
- Wheelock, A., & Miao, J. (2005). The ninth grade bottleneck. *The School Administrator*, 62(3), 36-40. Retrieved from <http://www.aasa.org/publications>
- Wise, B. (2008). High schools at the tipping point. *Educational Leadership*, 8(65), 8-13.