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The purpose of this mixed-methods sequential explanatory research study was to determine whether there were significant differences between high schools having no freshman facility, a freshman wing, or a freshman campus on eight student performance measures. A second purpose was to examine principals' perceptions of how their schools transition freshmen and how these transition strategies and arrangements worked. Of the eight ANOVAs conducted, only one analysis was statistically significant between the school configurations. In facilities using a freshman campus, high school students with disabilities earned significantly more core credit units than their counterparts in schools using no freshman facility. During individual interviews, all 15 principles emphasized using transition strategies to help students adjust to high school.

## **Keywords**

accountability, student achievement, school configuration, ninth-grade transition

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# The Effect of Campus Configuration on Ninth-Grade Achievement

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this mixed-methods sequential explanatory research study was to determine whether there were significant differences between high schools having no freshman facility, a freshman wing, or a freshman campus on eight student performance measures. A second purpose was to examine principals' perceptions of how their schools transition freshmen and how these transition strategies and arrangements worked. Of the eight ANOVAs conducted, only one analysis was statistically significant between the school configurations. In facilities using a freshman campus, high school students with disabilities earned significantly more core credit units than their counterparts in schools using no freshman facility. During individual interviews, all 15 principals emphasized using transition strategies to help students adjust to high school.*

## Keywords

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Our nation's high schools are being held to higher and tougher standards of academic accountability, and no grade level poses a greater threat to public school accountability than the ninth grade. The transition from middle to high school can be difficult due to the physiological and emotional changes associated with this age and grade level (Eccles, Midgley, & Lord, 1991). Hertzog and Morgan (1997) suggested the change from middle to high school is the biggest and most difficult transition students will make in their educational journey. An unsuccessful transition into high school carries a high price for both the student and the school in light of the high stakes surrounding student achievement and educational accountability.

Grade span configurations in schools are designed to match the development of the child to an appropriate educational environment (Kmieciak, 2007). Schwerdt and West (2013) concluded different configurations of grade spans impact student achievement in positive ways whereas Simmons and Blyth (1987) discovered negative outcomes such as poor self-esteem and declining grades. Effective grade span configurations were determined by Kerr (2002) to best serve ninth-grade adolescents, produce positive student outcomes, cause a decline in student alienation, and a reduce high school dropout rate. A poor use of facility space and organizational methods failed to meet the

challenging demands of ninth-grade adolescence (Cotton, 2001; Eccles et al., 1991; Fields, 2005; Kerr, 2002; Kmieciak, 2007).

Simmons and Blyth (1987) discovered high schools to be less personal, more competitive, and ability-centered rather than student-centered. Eccles, Midgley, and Adler (1984) reported the transition to high school to be one of the most difficult transitions a student will face, even more difficult than the transition to college. High school designs that lack support for ninth-grade adolescents attributed to the failure rates ninth graders experienced due to a school's inability to serve the academic and social needs of the ninth-grade students (Roderick & Cambum, 1999). Promotion rates to tenth grade plummeted, and dropout rates in the ninth-grade were three times the national average for schools failing to employ effective transitional strategies (Cook, Fowler, & Harris, 2008).

Roderick and Cambum (1999) suggested high schools consider transitions and reforms similar to smaller learning communities to improve academic outcomes for ninth graders. A personalized and student-centered experience reflected increases in the rate of promotion and graduation from high school (Conrad, 2007; Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; Kmieciak, 2007). Neild (2009) reported schools using smaller learning communities had significant achievement

gains and promotion rates over complex, bureaucratically structured school settings. The U.S. Department of Education (2001) study, *An Overview of Smaller Learning Communities in High School*, reported lower dropout rates, lower incidences of misbehavior, and increased student efficacy in smaller schools.

Students who attended smaller learning communities such as ninth-grade academies had higher mean scores in Algebra I and Biology (Styron & Peasant, 2010). Peasant (2006) indicated students attending separate ninth-grade facilities scored significantly higher on the Algebra I and Biology End-of-Course Testing (EOCT) than students attending a traditional ninth through twelfth high school. Examination of attendance and behavior patterns of ninth-grade students in an academy versus ninth-grade students in a traditional high school setting determined behavior and attitudes toward school to be higher in freshman academies, with the attendance of ninth-graders higher in the traditional setting (Bennett, 2012). On the other hand, Irvin (2013) discovered higher percentages in attendance, EOCT performance, and graduation rate in the traditional high school setting versus the freshman academies, accompanied by Daniel's (2010) observations of the ninth-grade academy showing no growth in student performance from the seventh-grade to the ninth-grade when comparing exceeds, meets, and does-not-meet categories.

Cook et al. (2008) stated the development of students to be college and career ready begins at the high school level in the ninth grade. Freshman academies aid in facilitating a vision for life after high school with elaborate graduation plans (Daniel, 2010; Fulco, 2009). The achievement of ninth-graders not only serves as an early indicator of high school graduation, but how well prepared students are for postsecondary options (Cook et al., 2008). The College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) measures a school's capability of preparing ninth-grade students to be college and career ready by using four core credits earned as an indicator. The failure to earn four credits in the four core subject areas finds ninth-grade students not on track for college readiness (Georgia Department of Education, 2012).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there were significant differences between high schools having no freshman facility, a freshman wing, or a freshman campus on eight selected student performance measures. A second purpose was to examine principals' perceptions of how their schools transition freshmen, how these transition

strategies and arrangements worked, and why these schools employed a particular school configuration.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

A mixed-methods sequential explanatory research design utilizing a pragmatic, worldview framework allowed the development of interview questions for the principals after analyzing the quantitative findings. This strategy allowed an understanding of the problem to be gained through analysis of the quantitative data and the use of interview responses in the qualitative portion to gain a deeper understanding of why school districts chose certain facility arrangements to transition students to high school.

The independent variable for the quantitative analysis was school configuration with three levels (high schools having no freshman facility, a freshman wing, or a freshman campus). The dependent variables were school mean scores on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT; percentage of all students, Black students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities meeting or exceeding standards on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT; percentage of students with disabilities earning three core credits in the ninth-grade; and percentage of students earning four core credits in the ninth-grade, overall CCRPI score, and the graduation rate.

### **Participants**

Of the 349 public high schools in Georgia, 125 schools were included in the quantitative analysis. Schools with no freshman facility (224 schools) and schools using a freshman wing (100 schools) were matched to the freshman campus schools by high school enrollment, ninth-grade enrollment, and percentage of minority students. After removing schools that did not match the freshman campus schools across the three criteria, 50 schools using no freshman facility and 50 schools using a freshman wing were randomly selected from each school configuration. All 25 schools using a freshman campus were included in the analysis. For the qualitative phase, five principals were randomly selected from each school configuration (i.e., total of 15 principals) for follow-up interviews.

### **Instrumentation**

**Quantitative.** The EOCT is a standards-based achievement test given to public school students in

Georgia upon completion of the following courses: Ninth-Grade Literature, American Literature, Coordinate Algebra, Analytic Geometry, Physical Science, Biology, U. S. History, and Economics (Georgia Department of Education, 2013). The ninth-grade Georgia Literature EOCT was the primary instrument for the quantitative phase of the study (Georgia Department of Education, 2013). The Georgia Department of Education, along with test contractors, established content validity, construct validity, and criterion-related validity for the ninth-grade Literature EOCT. In addition, the reliability for the ninth-grade Literature EOCT was considered good to excellent with a Cronbach's alpha of .92 and a standard error of measurement of 3.31.

**Qualitative.** Credibility and trustworthiness must exist on the qualitative portion as well and, in order to ensure this, researchers are responsible for documenting procedures and steps of the process (Creswell, 2009). The interview questions were developed and then evaluated by a four-person expert panel consisting of four professors of higher education. After feedback was provided and modifications made, the seven-question interview was finalized. A semi-structured interview protocol was followed for interviewer consistency. To ensure accuracy of these data, a recording device was employed and all responses were transcribed. The transcribed interviews were sent back to the participants for review to ensure accuracy.

## Data Collection and Analysis

**Quantitative.** The data employed were archival data from the Georgia Department of Education website. The specific archival data used were 2013-2014 school mean scale scores on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT; percentage of all students, Black students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities meeting or exceeding standards on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT; percentage of students with disabilities earning three core credits in the ninth-grade; and percentage of students earning four core credits in the ninth-grade, CCRPI scores, and graduation rates. Statistical considerations (i.e., missing data and outliers) and assumptions (i.e., interval level, normality, homogeneity of variance, and independence of observations) were checked before the analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted.

**Qualitative.** The data consisted of the interviews of the 15 principals (five principals from each school configuration). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Analysis of continual reflection about the data helped in organizing categories and similar themes.

This process was conducted to determine whether the principals' responses supported or refuted the quantitative findings. Both Maxwell (2005) and Patton (2002) agreed using a semi-structured interview protocol helps maintain the focus of the study while allowing for open-ended questioning so any unanticipated themes could emerge. Nevertheless, some of the coding was anticipated; therefore, the results were categorized and double checked for congruent or discrepant findings (Maxwell, 2005). The transcribed interviews were sent back to the participants for clarification.

## Results and Discussion

### Demographic Characteristics of Schools

The demographic data from the three high school configurations revealed freshman campus high schools averaged 350 more students than high schools using a freshman wing and more than 588 students than high schools using no freshman facility (see Table 1). For ninth-grade enrollment, high schools using a freshman campus averaged more than 64 students than high schools using a freshman wing and more than 155 students than high schools using no freshman facility. These enrollment figures indicated high schools with larger overall enrollments typically used a freshman campus or freshman wing configuration to help transition freshmen into smaller learning communities.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of High Schools by School Configuration*

Group	n	Enrollment		Percentage			
		Total <sup>a</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	White	Black	ED <sup>b</sup>	SWD <sup>c</sup>
No Freshman Facility	50	1050.36	310.94	53.4	34.7	53.8	10.6
Freshman Wing	50	1288.84	401.34	42.3	43.9	59.1	11.3
Freshman Campus	25	1638.84	466.20	55.3	31.2	55.1	11.9

*Note:* Total<sup>a</sup> = High school enrollment for grade 9-grade 12;

<sup>b</sup>ED = economically disadvantaged; <sup>c</sup>SWD = students with disabilities.

### Quantitative Findings

**Ninth-Grade Literature EOCT.** There were eight performance measures in the quantitative section of the study. The first four analyses were measures of student

achievement performance on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT. None of these analyses led to significant differences, beginning with the ninth-grade Literature mean scale scores. High schools using a freshman campus had a higher mean scale score, with an average mean scale score of 437.27 over high schools using no freshman facility ( $M = 435.73$ ) and high schools using a freshman wing ( $M = 433.01$ ). However, there was no significant difference between the three school configurations on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT mean scale score,  $F(2, 122) = 1.45$ ,  $p = .24$ ,  $\omega^2 = .007$ . The results are consistent with those communicated by Barbour (2009), Cramer (2006), and Hendrix (2007) but inconsistent with the conclusions of Styron and Peasant (2010), who found students set apart by a freshman academy significantly outperformed students in high schools not using a freshman facility on Algebra and biology mean scale scores.

The next three analyses used ninth-grade Literature EOCT results from at-risk subgroups (Black students, economically disadvantaged students, and students identified with a disability) represented in the literature to suffer academically during the transition to high school (Barbour, 2009; Kmiec, 2007; Peasant, 2006; Styron & Peasant, 2010). High schools with no freshman facility had percentages of Black students meeting or exceeding standards on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT, ranging from 53.3% to 100% with a mean of 81.78% ( $SD = 8.56$ ). High schools using a freshman wing had percentages of Black students meeting or exceeding standards on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT, ranging from 68.5% to 100% with a mean of 82.99% ( $SD = 7.72$ ). While High schools using a freshman campus had percentages of Black students meeting or exceeding standards on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT, ranging from 67.2% to 96.9% and with a mean of 82.18% ( $SD = 7.88$ ). There was no significant difference between the three school configurations on the percentage of Black students meeting or exceeding standards on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT,  $F(2, 116) = 0.27$ ,  $p = .76$ ,  $\omega^2 = .01$ .

High schools with no freshman facility had percentages of economically disadvantaged students meeting or exceeding standards on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT, ranging from 65.1% to 94.0% with a mean of 83.75% ( $SD = 5.78$ ). High schools using a freshman wing had percentages of economically disadvantaged students meeting or exceeding standards on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT, ranging from 55.9% to 100.0% with a mean of 83.38% ( $SD = 6.72$ ). High schools using a freshman campus had percentages of economically disadvantaged students meeting or exceeding standards on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT, ranging from 71.6% to 95.3% with a mean of 84.30% ( $SD = 6.49$ ). There was no significant difference between the three

school configurations on the percentage of economically disadvantaged students meeting or exceeding standards on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT,  $F(2, 122) = 0.18$ ,  $p = .84$ ,  $\omega^2 = .01$ .

High schools with no freshman facility had students identified with a disability meeting or exceeding standards on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT, ranging from 45.07% to 54.45% with a mean of 49.76% ( $SD = 16.49$ ). High schools using a freshman wing had percentages ranging from 49.37% to 58.26%, with a mean of 53.81% ( $SD = 14.96$ ). High schools with a freshman campus had percentages ranging from 50.31% to 62.84%, with a mean of 56.57% ( $SD = 14.84$ ). There was no significant difference between the three school configurations on the percentage of students with disabilities meeting or exceeding standards on the ninth-grade literature EOCT,  $F(2, 119) = 1.74$ ,  $p = .18$ ,  $\omega^2 = .01$ .

Although no significant difference existed in any of these three at-risk subgroups, 56.7% of students identified with a disability in high schools using a freshman campus met or exceeded standards on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT, compared to 49.76% of students identified with a disability in high schools using no freshman facility. High schools using a freshman campus had higher percentages of students identified with a disability in their schools. The difference in performance in this category, although not significant, was nonetheless accomplished by a larger number of students identified with a disability. This finding would suggest setting apart freshmen has an impact, in part, on the performance of students identified with a disability. Lee and Smith (1995) agreed with this difference in performance, for their study found students learn and achieve more when set apart in smaller learning communities like freshman wings or campuses, especially those disadvantaged or with different cultural backgrounds.

**Carnegie Credit Earned by Ninth Graders.** The fifth and sixth data points were used to examine student promotion rates to the tenth grade. Schools with higher percentages of students earning core credit (English, math, science, and social studies) in the ninth-grade were more likely to be promoted to the tenth grade and ultimately graduate. The mean percentage of ninth graders earning four core Carnegie units ranged from 27.8% in high schools using no freshman facility to 29.11% of ninth graders in high schools using a freshman wing to 33.94% of ninth graders in high schools using a freshman campus. There was no significant difference between the three school configurations on the percentage of students earning four Carnegie units,  $F(2, 122) = 1.54$ ,  $p = .22$ ,  $\omega^2 = .009$ .

The mean percentage of students identified with a disability earning three core Carnegie units ranged from

22.09% of ninth graders in high schools using no freshman facility to 25.78% of ninth graders in high schools using a freshman wing to 31.89% of ninth graders in high schools using a freshman campus. There was a significant difference between school configuration on the percentage of students identified with a disability earning three core units,  $F(2, 122) = 3.31, p = .04, \omega^2 = .04$ . The omega squared value indicated a small to medium effect size. A post hoc test was conducted using Tukey's HSD. Results indicated the mean percentage of students identified with disability earning three Carnegie core credits in high schools using a freshman campus ( $M = 31.89, SD = 16.11$ ) was significantly higher ( $p = .03$ ) than students identified with a disability in high schools using no freshman facility ( $M = 22.09, SD = 16.75$ ).

Considering a larger percentage of students identified with a disability were located in high schools using a freshman campus, the data indicated a much larger likelihood of the number of students identified with a disability being promoted to the tenth grade. Pertaining to academics, this finding would seem to indicate transition needs of students identified with a disability are better met in high schools using a freshman campus over those high schools not using a freshman facility. Students identified with a disability had lower rates of graduation from high school making this a significant finding.

**Graduation Rate.** The final two data points examined the graduation rates and the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) of schools. Graduation rates are the gold standard by which high schools in Georgia are measured, and CCRPI scores encapsulate this performance with four year and five year graduation rate performances for schools. High schools in Georgia are held accountable for the rate students graduate on time. This accountability factor comes not only from federal law, but the court of public opinion where graduation is considered a major achievement of the education system (Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2012). The graduation rate can hinge on student performance in the ninth-grade (Cook et al., 2008).

Schools using a freshman campus had an average graduation rate of 79.14%. Schools using no freshman facility had an average graduation rate of 78.27%, and schools using a freshman wing had an average graduation rate of 72.52%. There was no significant difference between the three school configurations on graduation rate,  $F(2, 122) = 2.41, p = 0.09, \omega^2 = .02$ .

Although schools with a freshman campus outperformed schools with no freshman facility in the percentage of ninth-grade students identified with a disability earning three score Carnegie units, the overall

graduation rates were separated by an average of 0.87%. This suggested ninth-grade students identified with a disability in high schools using no freshman facility made significant progress after the ninth-grade year for the graduation rates to be almost equal. Students identified with a disability in high schools using a freshman campus did not perform as well as their counterparts in high schools using no freshman facility. While students with disabilities earned significantly more Carnegie credit in the ninth-grade in the two different settings, virtually no difference was observed in their overall graduation rates. This finding contradicted Cole (2006), who anticipated accountability and NCLB would negatively impact schools attempting to keep students identified with a disability on track for graduation. Cole (2006) predicted graduation rates to drop, as students identified with a disability were observed to get off track at higher rates than their regular education counterparts.

#### **College and Career Readiness Performance Index.**

High schools with no freshman facility had CCRPI scores ranging from 56.0 to 93.4, with a mean CCRPI score of 69.36 ( $SD = 7.78$ ). High schools with a freshman wing had CCRPI scores ranging from 53.5 to 91.6 and a mean CCRPI of 67.34 ( $SD = 7.41$ ), whereas high schools using a freshman campus had scores ranging from 66.1 to 73.2 and a mean CCRPI score of 69.66 ( $SD = 8.60$ ). There was no significant difference between the three school configurations on CCRPI scores,  $F(2, 122) = 1.11, p = .33, \omega^2 = .002$ .

Despite the fact schools using a freshman campus had a slightly higher score, virtually no difference in CCRPI scores existed by school configuration. Considering CCRPI encompassed data results from end-of-course tests and post-high school readiness indicators (i.e., writing test scores and graduation rates), it is reasonable to discover nonsignificant findings in the previous data points found in the CCRPI comparison. A similar large-scale study of Florida schools conducted by Rudes (2006) concluded the same finding. There was no significant difference for ninth graders in smaller learning communities versus larger learning community schools on standardized testing contributing to accountability scores in Florida. Rudes indicated this was cause for concern for school reformers looking for ways to accomplish schoolwide gains in the era of high stakes accountability. District leaders may remain unconvinced to employ any such freshman facility to improve their CCRPI performance unless the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is reauthorized to include other accountability measures.

## **Qualitative Findings**

The interviews captured responses from principals from the three high school configurations (no freshman facility, a freshman wing, and a freshman campus). The questions targeted driving forces for setting apart freshmen, transition strategies, advantages and disadvantages in the three school configurations, influence each facility had on specific subgroups, students' ability to remain on track, and the effect of using (or not using) a separation strategy on preparation for high stakes testing. The final question asked why schools would use a facility to transition freshmen if data failed to support its use. Themes emerging from each question will be discussed in the following sections.

Responses in the interviews revealed several themes describing why each school used a freshman wing, freshman campus, or no freshman facility. Growth in enrollment, outgrowing space in the school building, and underutilized facilities were most often mentioned from the principals overseeing high schools using a freshman campus. This response was expected since larger schools were associated with the movement to smaller learning communities and freshman academies (Conrad, 2007; Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; Kmiec, 2007; Lashway, 2000). Only two of the freshman campus principals interviewed mentioned academic performance as a main driving force for setting apart freshmen. In one interview, a principal said, "Honestly, it came down to overcrowding." A vacant middle school building helped this principal's district open a freshman campus. A second principal's school started using a freshman wing in 2005 when funding for a smaller learning community grant was awarded to his school to improve academic performance of the ninth graders. Once his district built a new elementary school, the vacant building was turned into a freshman campus and the ninth graders were placed there. A third principal's high school was overcrowded as well, but funding was secured in his district to build a brand new freshman campus facility. This was the only school noting new construction for a freshman facility. These responses seemed to indicate matters of convenience and a surplus of available facilities as the major impetus for use of a freshman campus.

Overcrowding was not mentioned in responses from the principals in high schools using a freshman wing. Nor the theme of underutilized space, during the interviews. Instead, the reasons for setting apart freshmen by wing were mostly to improve the academic performance and behavior of the ninth graders. A focus on the social adjustment, keeping students on track, and grant funding were all mentioned as driving forces. A principal said his

school was "losing a lot of kids early in the ninth-grade," and concentrating students into one portion of the building helped teachers establish critical relationships with students contributing to keeping more of them in school. Two principals concurred in stating their schools focused on the academic performance, promotion, and social behaviors of ninth graders. Two principals mentioned funding as a driving force to use a freshman wing.

Principals in high schools having no freshman facility mentioned their districts considered research and educational fads like smaller learning communities. The lack of overcrowding and extra space meant no efforts were made to set apart freshmen. Four principals acknowledged some discussion occurred, but district leaders remained unconvinced to commit to the ideology of setting apart freshmen. A principal indicated he "didn't jump on the ninth-grade academy bandwagon" and the lack of facility space for a freshman school or wing was the main obstacle for the consideration of setting apart ninth graders.

None of the principals thought their school fell short in supporting high school transition. Transition activities began in the second semester of the eighth-grade year and continued all the way through the first day of school. Extra-curricular activities like athletics, clubs, fine arts, and JROTC were marketed to the students in the eighth grade to capture their attention in hopes that participation would bring meaning and purpose to staying in school. One of the principals said his school required "all freshmen to join a club or group with hopes of deterring any form of [dropping out]." Students were placed in an advisement class with a teacher who sponsored the club or activity in which an individual student had signed up. Findings from other research conveyed the same message on effective transitions to high school. Having smaller learning communities was not enough; a sense of belonging to the school was a critical finding of this research and served as an indicator of a student's motivation to learn. Induction was seen as a key component to not only introducing the students to high school, but to provide opportunity and membership to high school activities in hopes of increasing academic motivation and the likelihood of graduation.

The principals were opinionated on the advantages and disadvantages of their transition arrangement for their freshman. The principals in high schools using a freshmen wing mentioned the wing was the best of both worlds. Isolation could occur when needed and the opportunity for integration with the upperclassmen meant a fuller transition experience. Other advantages were collaboration of faculty, the cohort concept of togetherness, and a hybrid of the middle school concept where students were placed



on teams to improve faculty awareness of individual strengths and weaknesses. Principals in these high schools felt confident their arrangement was best, since they could determine the amount of support and transition needed with more in the beginning of the year and less as the academic year progressed. Two principals confident in this strategy said there were no disadvantages to the freshman wing concept.

Principals of high schools using a freshman campus echoed the focus on a single cohort of students; and having them in one building helped the faculty focus on teaching, learning, and improved transition strategies such as the use of advisement periods. The number one advantage of the campus arrangement indicated self-contained students having less anxiety, lower incidents of misbehavior, and an increased likelihood of navigating the building. Principals indicated the major advantage was a major disadvantage. The separation of self-contained students tended to make the students “stay freshmen too long,” in the words of one principal. The other major disadvantage was faculty and students viewed themselves as a freshman campus. Thus, freshman students were not identifying themselves as high school students. This sentiment was opposite of what district leaders had intended for the campus arrangement to accomplish.

All five high school principals using no freshman facility said the major advantage to having ninth graders with the upperclassmen was the use of student exemplars and mentors. Mizelle (1999) noted this was an important transition strategy of social adjustment in high schools. Principals indicated freshmen tended to “grow up” faster. Any strategy short of full integration into the entire student body delayed maturation of the students and created additional transitions when the students moved to the tenth grade. These principals were quick to point out students tend to “get lost in the shuffle,” and there are models of poor behavior as well. These problems serve as catalysts for high schools to entertain the idea of segregating ninth graders.

Aside from corralling ninth-grade misbehavior, providing social support, or nurturing of economically disadvantaged students, the specific facility type did not seem to matter. This was an important finding and one substantiating the quantitative findings of the ninth-grade Literature EOCT performances. African-American students, economically disadvantaged students, or students identified as disabled were expected to perform similarly on the ninth-grade Literature EOCT regardless of facility type. Principals who set apart the freshmen by campus acknowledged having “flex” learning time. Separation

meant a heightened focus on student weaknesses and strengths. This finding was not supported by the ninth-grade Literature EOCT performances. According to 8 of 10 principals using a freshman wing, or no freshman facility, the focus should be to increase the level of instruction provided for ninth graders.

The final question of the principal interviews was designed to capture responses once principals were made aware of the quantitative findings of this study. This question went to the heart of the matter, as the quantitative findings surprised many of the participants, seemingly catching some off guard (principals of high schools using a wing or campus) while vindicating others (principals using no facility). Some principals said schools (i.e., at least two in his district) moved towards the freshman academy concept to capitalize on a surplus of empty buildings. Reflecting back on schools in his district, he said, “I don’t think there was an academic reason for using a freshman campus.” Two schools in his district “had the luxury of having defunct middle school facilities...and when the schools got up to around 2000 kids...they just couldn’t handle” the issue of overcrowding. A principal in one of the freshman campus high schools said, “the overcrowding was huge for us and I wonder how many schools were just like us” when deciding to use a freshman campus (noting schools in this study who used a freshman campus had higher enrollment). One principal noted he believed many schools did not read the research on smaller learning communities or freshman academies but, rather, took advantage of vacant buildings to pursue the idea of transitioning students to high school.

Cost effectiveness factored into districts’ decisions to set apart freshmen rather than academic improvement in transitioning students to the ninth-grade. Two principals said their districts moved to a wing or campus concept to avoid having to build another high school. Growth in school districts preceded many moves toward a freshman wing or campus, as one principal noted why his high school was using a freshman campus. He stated, “We experienced only moderate growth” in the community, but the growth was still more than the facility with grades 9 through 12 could withstand. Having a vacant middle school needing to be repurposed, taxpayer money was seemingly put to good use while accomplishing what some research reported about the high school transition.

Another response to this question surfaced in the interviews. Several principals said perception was a key factor in setting apart freshmen. A principal in a high school not using a freshman facility said, “Parents of freshmen children are scared to death. I think sometimes for community relations we can say we have a freshman

wing, and students are going to be with their [peers], and this is going to be more helpful for them. And I think that comfort level is good for parents.” When a principal in a high school using a freshman wing was asked the final question he had a one-word response: “perception.” When asked to expand on that answer, he said many shared the perception. “Parents, community members, even our perception as administrators. It’s a comfort zone and makes you think you’re doing something.”

## Conclusion

The transition to high school proves to be one of the most difficult transitions to navigate (Bottoms, 2008; Mizelle, 1999). Should consideration be given to building a wing or campus to house ninth graders with the construction of a new high school? Should there be consideration for building a new high school when building a new middle or elementary school when repurposing the older school is cheaper?

It seems as though local decisions drive what best meets the needs of the school and its community. High schools having no facility really had no need to set apart freshmen as none of the respective schools suffered from overcrowding. Other schools had no space available for consideration as a freshman campus, nor was the use of a wing viewed as a strategic option. There was a sense of vindication for schools not seen as sensitive to the plight of ninth graders. These quantitative findings supported the decision to remain a high school integrating upperclassmen and freshmen.

Reasons for setting apart freshmen were missed by the quantitative conclusions. High schools using a freshman wing reported improved behavior of ninth graders when set apart by the wing. Maturity was a main factor in his district’s decision to set apart freshmen. Two principals interviewed noted about half of the discipline issues came from ninth graders. Utilizing a separate wing, both principals observed a reduction in ninth grader discipline referrals or a significant reduction of incidences. Aside from gains in academic achievement, the behavior component was reason enough for three principals to see the advantages of using a freshman wing.

Overcrowding and the luxury of underutilized space helped to provide the impetus for using a freshman campus. These conditions benefited the schools in many ways. District leaders accomplished a reduction in the tension of overcrowding, presented the perception of supporting freshmen, and were good stewards of taxpayers’ money. A principal of a high school using a freshman campus

admitted to the advantage of having students separated by stating, “I really don’t see how we could fit them” in the facility with 10th through 12th grades. Despite no statistically significant difference in the performance of ninth graders in any style facility, two principals stood firmly by the freshman campus concept.

Changes in public school accountability have charged high schools with more than just graduating students on time. High schools are being measured by how well students are prepared for life after high school-college, technical school, military, or career. Transitioning freshmen is important, since their performance factors more into the school’s accountability grade. Schools must have a solid understanding of the specific needs and climate of the school and community. Changes in transitioning freshmen are more than just educational gains and meeting accountability measures.

Although this study failed to show how setting apart ninth graders by wing or campus could lead to greater gains in accountability measures like ninth-grade Literature EOCT achievement, graduation rate, and earned Carnegie core credit, it illustrates why school leaders carefully transition students to high school. The delicate and deliberate manner all schools handled the transition to high school serves as testament to district leaders considering ninth-grade achievement as paramount to meeting the needs of adolescents and managing to “make the grade” in accountability. As schools continue to attempt to blur the lines of transition from middle to high school, decisions to set apart freshmen will continue to be researched. Educational fads, prior research, funding, and perceptions will continue to factor into the decisions of district leaders and elected boards of education. The findings of this study might assist school leaders’ future decisions. Knowing what will best serve the local high school and, most important, the students should continue to be the number one driving force in whether or not to use a freshman facility.

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