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THE EFFICACY OF BRIDGING MIDDLE SCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL
PROGRAMS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF
NINTH GRADE PERFORMANCE

By
Brian Repici

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
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Approved by _____
Professor

Date Approved 4/15/04

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ABSTRACT

Brian Repici

THE EFFICACY OF BRIDGING MIDDLE SCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF NINTH GRADE PERFORMANCE 2003/04

Dr. Robert W. Kern
Master of Arts in School Administration

Currently, at Timber Creek Regional High School, there is no supportive program for entering students and a lack of communication with the sending school district, Gloucester Township. The purpose of this study was to develop a bridge program that would better the transition for students entering into high school using an action research design resulting in evidence to support the need for teacher and student training in eighth and ninth grades. Through teacher training sessions, the intern provided an atmosphere for sharing teaching methodologies and exchanged expectation levels. Achievement loss associated with the transition to high school from middle school will diminish as a result of the concentrated efforts to improve student readiness. The transition program will better students' performance and allow students to meet and exceed high school expectations.

MINI-ABSTRACT

Brian Repici

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PROGRAMS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF NINTH GRADE PERFORMANCE
2003/04

Dr. Robert W. Kern

Master of Arts in School Administration

Between the two school districts in Gloucester Township there is a lack of communication. The intern provided an atmosphere for sharing teaching methodologies through articulation sessions. Achievement loss associated between the two school districts will diminish as a result of the concentrated efforts to improve student readiness.

Acknowledgements

For those with dreams never lived.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Focus of the Study

Black Horse Regional High School District is the parent school community to Gloucester Township School District, the feeder district. It is evident that the ninth grade students are scoring lower on classroom and standardized tests, responsible for most discipline problems, and disengaged from the educational process. Currently, at Timber Creek Regional High School, there is no supportive program for entering students and a lack of communication with the sending school district, Gloucester Township.

The intern will focus on creating a bridge program that would ease students' transition from the middle to high school. The program entails staff development, a teacher exchange program, and administrative alignment. The use of survey research was conducted all on teachers involved in the program to measure the effectiveness of the teacher training and communication between the school districts. The transition program will better students' performance and allow students to meet and exceed high school expectations.

Purpose of the Study

The intern determined the effectiveness of a bridge program on ninth graders' performance to enhance their skills and level of preparedness to meet high school expectations. The purpose of this study was to develop a bridge program that would improve the transition for students entering into high school using an action research design resulting in evidence to support the need for teacher training in eighth and ninth grades.

Achievement loss associated with the transition to high school from middle school will diminish because of the concentrated efforts to improve student readiness. Students will be able to compete within a framework of high expectations with the right kind of emotional and academic support system. The articulation between teachers from both middle school and high school should be able to achieve this within a two-year span.

This research study was designed to make a contribution to the students who make the transition into Timber Creek High School from Mullen Middle School every year. It will provide the evidence for further study by measuring the effectiveness of a transition program. Teachers were better trained to understand their role in the students' transition and how they can positively influence students' performance starting in eighth grade.

Eighth grade teachers were to better serve their students by preparing them for ninth grade expectations. It will no longer be acceptable for disengaged students to fall by the wayside and not have the emotional and academic support needed for success in ninth grade. This intern would like to create an environment where all students coming into high school are focused on continuous improvement and contribute to a culture where higher standards of learning are achieved. The intern will be establishing ISSLC Standard 1: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community. The intern will be establishing ISSLC standard 2: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

Definitions

Achievement Loss – the lack of quality and quantity of a student’s work

Action Research – any systematic inquiry conducted by researchers in the teaching/ learning environment to gather information about the ways their schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn.

Articulation – to give clarity or distinction to the communication links between two school districts; to unite by joint meetings.

Bridge Program - was defined as a means of communicating between Timber Creek High School and, primarily, Mullen Middle School, to adjust students’ focus from eighth grade to ninth grade expectations and capabilities.

Likert Scale – asks faculty to respond to a series of statements and allows the researcher to measure those responses.

Reliability – the consistency that the data measures what it is attempting to measure over a period of time.

Transition - a movement, development, or evolution from one form, stage, or style to another.

Validity – how the data collected accurately gauges what we are trying to measure.

Limitations of the Study

The study will be conducted starting in the summer of 2003 and continued beyond the 2004-05 at Timber Creek Regional High School and Mullen Middle School. The intern will in-service faculty three times throughout the course of this study granted Black Horse Pike Regional High School permits time to meet with Mullen Middle School teachers. That period of time may range over the next several school years and the changing of several key figures may alter original intentions, ideas, and data. The data collection will be gathered by the completion of a Likert scale survey distributed after each in-service to each of the three academic departments in order to measure the effectiveness of communication between the high school and middle school.

The study will be limited to the Math, Language Arts, and Social Studies Departments. The sample size may limit the use of this study. Another possible intervening variable may include the subjectivity of the survey instrument.

Setting of the Study

The Black Horse Pike Regional School District is comprised of three municipalities: Bellmawr Borough, Runnemede Borough, and Gloucester Township. These three municipalities form the northeast corner of Camden County and are located approximately twenty minutes from the Delaware River. Access through Big Timber Creek enabled settlers to establish early colonial southern New Jersey (Gloucester Township Historic and Preservation Committee, 1995).

Bellmawr Borough, Runnemede Borough and Gloucester Township were once part of the “Irish Tenths,” an arbitrary division of the land during the early colonial times spanning from the Delaware River to the Atlantic Ocean. This area was particularly important because Gloucester Township’s community of Chews Landing was positioned at a key networking of navigable waterways connecting Camden and the Delaware River. Bellmawr and Runnemede were part of the Old Center Township until 1929 when they became independent boroughs following an action of the New Jersey Legislature (Worton, 1964).

In the 1920’s, improvements to the Black Horse Pike through Bellmawr, Runnemede and Gloucester Township provided a direct link between Philadelphia and Atlantic City. Many families began to settle in the area and the three municipalities began to grow. Eventually, construction brought the New Jersey Turnpike, bridges, freeway systems, and rail lines (Worton, 1964).

Bellmawr Borough covers approximately 3.02 square miles of land area. At its peak in 1970, Bellmawr's population totaled 15,618. In the last two decades, the population has declined to 12,603. Despite the declining population numbers, Bellmawr ranks as the tenth most populous municipality in Camden County. The largest population shift has been accompanied by the nature of the population (Gloucester Township Municipal Office, 1998).

In 1970 the median age was 25.5 with 28% of the population being school-aged and 4% over 65 years old. By 1990 the median age was 35.5. Most of the residents who vote in Bellmawr are well over the median age and As demonstrated in Table 1, the school-aged population dropped to 16% and 10% of the population was over 65 years of age (Gloucester Township Municipal Office, 1998).

Table 1

Bellmawr Borough's Change in Student and Senior Population

Population Percent	1970	1990
School Aged	28	16
Senior Citizens	4	10

The town of Bellmawr is predominately Caucasian. As of 1990 African Americans totaled 0.9%, Hispanic Americans totaled 1.6% and other races 1.4% of the population (see Table 4). At the time of the 1990 census, the housing in Bellmawr consisted of 2,981 single-family detached houses, 800 single family attached units, 975 multi-family units, and 33 other units. Housing growth is limited in Bellmawr Borough because of the lack of vacant land. An average of six building permits were issued per year prior to 1990 (Gloucester Township Municipal Office, 1998).

Runnemedede Borough has Bellmawr on the north and Gloucester Township on the south. Runnemedede is 2.0 square miles and is the smallest of the three towns that make up the Black Horse Pike Regional School District. In 1950 the population consisted of 4,127 residents. The population continued to climb until the 1970's when it reached its highest population 10,475. Since that time the population has decreased to 8,930 residents. This decrease occurred at the same time as Bellmawr's decline (Gloucester Township Municipal Office, 1998).

As with Bellmawr Borough, the change in population of Runnemedede borough was accompanied by a change in the age characteristics. During the 1970's the average age was 27 and 25% of the population was school-aged. Conversely, senior citizens totaled 6% of the population. By the 1990 census, Runnemedede's median age of 34 increased seven years. As shown in Figure 2, school aged children totaled 16% and senior citizens more than doubled to 14% (Gloucester Township Municipal Office, 1998). See Table 2 below.

Table 2

Runnemedede Borough's Change in Student and Senior Population

Population Percent	1970	1990
School Aged	25	16
Senior Citizen	6	14

The ethnic demography of Runnemedede is similar to the town of Bellmawr with 95.9% of the population being white and 2.7% of the population African American (see Table 4). There are 3,420 households in Runnemedede. The housing trend in Runnemedede reflects a stable community because of the lack of developable land (Gloucester Township Municipal Office, 1998).

Gloucester Township is the southernmost town. The township consists of 23.14 square miles of land. The area of Gloucester Township is 4.6 times the combined land area of Bellmawr and Runnemede and is the fourth largest municipality in Camden County. According to the 1950 census, the population of Gloucester Township consisted of 7,984 residents. This is 2.7 times the combined rate of Bellmawr and Runnemede (Gloucester Township Municipal Office, 1998).

Gloucester Township's population data also demonstrates a rise in senior population figures, but to a lesser extent than Bellmawr and Runnemede. In 1970, the median age of Gloucester Township was 28 and by 1990 it increased a few tenths to 28.3 years of age. The school-aged population decreased from 26.3% in 1970 to 21.7% in 1990. Senior citizen levels decreased from 7.1% to 6.7% of the total population in 1990 (Gloucester Township Municipal Office, 1998). See Table 3 below.

Table 3

Gloucester Township's Change in Student and Senior Population

Population Percent	1970	1990
School Aged	26.3	21.7
Senior Citizen	7.1	6.7

The housing trend in Gloucester Township directly reflects the population increase. In 1970 there were 7,323 households in the township. By 1990 that number exploded to 19,893 households. During the 1990's the housing and population growth has slowed because of the scarcity of land. The racial makeup of Gloucester Township is 91.2% white, 6.1% African American and 2.7% other races (Gloucester Township Municipal Office, 1998) (see Table 4).

Table 4

Ethnic Diversity

Regional Sending District	Bellmawr	Runnemedede	Gloucester Township
Caucasian	97.7	95.9	91.2
African American	0.9	2.7	6.1
Other Races	1.4	1.4	2.7

Triton Regional High School draws students from Bellmawr and Runnemedede. Highland Regional High School and Timber Creek Regional High School draw students from Gloucester Township. The median family income for Bellmawr was \$20,797 in 1979 and increased to \$39,253 in 1990, an increase change of 88.7%. Runnemedede's median family income went from \$19,697 in 1979 to \$39,370 in 1990, a favorable percentage change of 99.9%. Gloucester Township's median family income increased from \$22,638 in 1979 to \$45,694 in 1990, a percentage change of 101.8% (Gloucester Township Municipal Office, 1998) (see Table 5 below).

Table 5

Median Family Income

Monetary Income	1979	1989
Bellmawr	20,797	39,253
Runnemedede	19,697	39,370
Gloucester Township	22,638	45,694

Unemployment percentages in the three districts are comparable. The three communities are all below the Camden County unemployment average from the 1989 census shown in Table 6 (Gloucester Township Municipal Office, 1998).

Table 6.

Unemployment Percentages

Unemployment Percentages	1989
Bellmawr	5.2
Runnemede	4.8
Gloucester Township	5.1

After receiving voter approval in a special election in September 1998, the Black Horse Pike Regional School District proceeded with plans to add a third high school to its district due to overcrowding at the two existing high schools, Triton and Highland. Timber Creek High School is the result of a successful building project launched to end the overcrowding and staggered sessions in the district. Timber Creek High School officially opened its doors in September of 2001, housing more than 900 ninth through eleventh graders (Black Horse Pike Regional School District, 2003).

Bellmawr, Runnemede, and Gloucester Township form the Black Horse Pike Regional School District. The district provides education to grades 9 through 12. Each of the three towns has their own school district for grades K through 8.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the project is three-fold. First, it will allow for the exploration of study between the teachers and programs at the Ann A. Mullen Middle school and Timber Creek High School. Secondly, the project will provide an atmosphere for articulation and build effective communication techniques between the Mullen Middle School and Timber Creek Regional High School social studies, language arts, and math teachers.

Lastly, through the implementation of survey research and ongoing action research, the product of this project will ease achievement loss associated with the transition from middle school to high school and allow students to be better prepared for a high school career.

Organization of the Study

This project will include survey research that will be distributed to Social Studies, Language Arts, and Math middle school and high school teachers participating in an articulation process with the goal to improve student preparation and performance.

Chapter Two will contain the review of the literature and related information so that the intern will better understand the nature of past studies. Chapter Three will outline the design of the study, which includes a description of the development and design of the research instruments, sampling techniques, a description of the data collection, and a description of the data analysis plan. Chapter Four will represent the research findings and Chapter Five will contain conclusions, implications, and any further studies conducted about reducing achievement loss associated with the transition from middle school to high school.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Literature Review

With the complexities of entering high school looming for eighth graders, a collection of data suggests that with proper remediation and communication between teachers, students, and schools, achievement loss associated with the transition between middle school and high school can be diminished. According to Nancy Mizelle, for ERIC Digests, suggests, “When middle school students took part in a high school transition program with several diverse articulation activities, fewer students were retained in the transition grade (1999).” The literature review will define the theoretical perspective of transitions between middle and high schools, investigate the methods used in remediation to ease the transition, and explore the students’ perceptions of making the jump to ninth grade into high school.

The movement from middle to high school is another transition that coincides with the natural occurrence of changing from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. According to Smith (1997) some children can grow into adolescence without the grief that others carry because of positive support systems found often in the schools. Educators are interested in measuring and altering negative effects of adolescent transition stages so children can flourish in school. Students are, “in the life cycle that encompassing puberty, value information, and social group interaction, as well as marked shifts in learning as a critical stage in human development (Hill, 1980 and Lipsitz, 1984).”

Due to the concern about ninth graders who enter high school without the necessary skills for success, researchers are exploring ways to alleviate achievement loss in ninth grade students. Solutions to alleviating achievement loss associated with the transition from middle school to high school include forging vital relationships between school, the community, the student, and the family. The recognition by high schools of the role that family plays in academic success is essential. Both middle schools and high schools need to catch simple problems, like not completing assignments on time, early into their ninth grade year. Middle schools and high schools can educate students about time management and study skills and make them aware of the increased demand and performance needed to succeed in high school (Newman and Myers, 2000).

Smith conducted a study of the effects of high school transition programs on the educational progress of young adolescents. She gathered the three types of transition programs that were available in many different school districts and compared the effects of those programs on student performance measured by grades. The first type targets the students; the second, parents; and the third, school staff members. The comparison of schools that offered at least one of each type of program versus those that offered programs targeting just one or two of those possible audiences demonstrated mixed results. The most common practice between all of the school included in the study was allowing parents to visit the high school and meet with teachers prior to the start of school. In schools where they offered ample support for the students, they lacked support for teachers in the districts and parents of children who are entering high school (Smith, 1997). Timber Creek High School offered similar support structures, but lacked the whole support structure for the students and community.

In 1998, Alspaugh conducted a study using two test groups: one of students who were transitioning into high school from a K-8 district and one of students who also transitioned into middle school from elementary school and, subsequently, again, after middle school into high school. Regardless of factors like socioeconomic status, race, and previous test scores, Alspaugh (1998) found that both groups experienced a “statistically significant” achievement loss. However, those students who were making the second transition of their school careers into high school from a 6-8 district experienced more of a decline in achievement than those students emigrating from a K-8 district. Furthermore, those students with two transitions had higher dropout rates in high school. Alspaugh (1998) concluded by stating, “the instability and adjustments required of students in school transitions were associated with educational outcomes.”

The transition into high school presents an array of emotional, physical, and intellectual changes into the lives of students. Students are faced with new challenges of being distracted due to the increasing complexity of peer groups, meeting a more demanding curriculum and juggling double the assignments. Newman and Myers (2000) believe students experience role loss, such as no longer being the top athlete or student because of the more anonymous setting in high school. Their study also tried to explore students’ feelings and perceptions about the transition from middle school to high school. Many times these perceptions were recorded with negative feedback from students and parents alike. Majority of students, 77%, were negative about teachers in high school and attributed their lack of success because current teachers were not like those in middle school. When students were asked why they did not do so well in high school, one of the two most common answers was “problems with teachers (2000).”

Students also indicated “teachers were not supportive and were harder than eighth grade teachers.” As Newman and Myers (2000) explained, teachers may have been unavailable and therefore, un- supportive. However, according to Mizelle (1999), students indicated that if their middle school teachers had been more, “responsible for their learning, taught them strategies for learning on their own and provided a more challenging curriculum, their transition to high school would have been eased.”

Another factor contributing to a lack of achievement from middle school to high school includes, students commented that, “the size of the school, the organization of classes, the length of classes, and interaction with new people were all challenging aspects of the transition to ninth grade (Newman and Myers, 2000).” Some students even addressed the problem with the leadership of the school and the lack of involvement by community or parents attributed to school mismanagement (Dornbusch, 1991).

Schools have a responsibility to assess and address the needs of students by examining prior learning and building a network of relationships with other schools, preferably those that are sending students into your school district. “Networking, collaborating, and working with other professionals can build a climate of learning that benefits all education’s stakeholders (Holm, 2003).” A foundation of learning can be forged by the collaboration of teachers between the sending and receiving school districts.

Communication among teachers whose schools are the sending and receiving districts can positively supplement the learning needs of its students and gain the respect from the community needed to forge positive growth and progression. Teachers can articulate shared pedagogical practices and create communication avenues that may influence students’ achievement.

Schools have gone as far as creating ninth grade academies, especially in urban settings, as Holly Holland described in 2001. “Central to the plan was a new freshman academy to help ninth graders make a smooth transition from middle school to high school.” According to Holland, schools that acquire nurturing positive relationships among teachers and students “are more likely to realize the payoff of more engaged students achieving at higher levels (2001).” The freshman academy also goes beyond matching middle school expectations and raises the level of capability and performance standards. Holland says, “This school is largely about relationships with students and teachers, and only when you build that can you make a change academically (2001).”

Another school district has created a support program similar to the freshman academy created at the urban high school described by Holly Holland. “The Ninth Grade House” created by Hugh Campbell (2001), carries over essential components of the middle school philosophy. “Curriculum is often integrated to allow the students to make better connections from one subject to another”, along with seemingly shrinking the size of the 2,300 student building by segregating cores of freshman from the general populace. The more intimate climate allows ninth graders to warm up to the high school experience. By using familiar middle school support systems students would continue to succeed for the next four years and even carry over into their professional lives. Campbell describes it like, “providing a private school education to a public school population.” In addition to providing different forms of support for students in the ‘Ninth Grade House’, the principal and guidance department carefully monitor the students’ performance and intervene if students are not demonstrating forward progression (Campbell, 2001).

According to Mac Iver (1990), there are three components to a successful transition program. The first successful type provides students and parents with adequate information regarding the differences between middle school and high school. Secondly, the program provides the transitioning students with support systems like counseling services and extra-curricular programs. The last component of a successful transition program will bring middle and high school teachers together to discuss, plan, and coordinate curriculums and requirements. Students and parents need to feel important within the educational process, so schools have to provide clear communication lines with defined paths and involve parents in the decision making process of choosing classes, for instance, for ninth grade enrollment. Mac Iver suggests the following ways students can learn about high school: (1) visit the high school occasionally; (2) 'shadow' a high school student; (3) visiting the high school for schedule information; (4) discussing ninth grade procedures and regulations with eighth grade teachers and counselors (1990).

Mimi Chapman (2001) believes that at risk student benefit from a social work initiated middle to high school transition program. The program's initiative allowed each incoming freshman to evolve without worry into the realm of high school concerns. Each incoming freshman was assigned a high school student mentor from the 11th grade class and freshman parents worked closely with the tutoring and supportive counseling enrichment activities. The program was comprehensive in the fact that in the last six weeks of the students' middle school years, the high school provided a presentation by a professional athlete, high school teacher, coach, and other professionals every day before entering high school.

The focus of those presentations was to align students' goals with professional requirements and the positive impact of good studying and schooling on success. The Communities in School program even held a parents' night linking the learning community with parents of at risk students. Social workers continually built stronger collaborative relationships between the school systems and the parents. "A high school transition program is one way to link students and their parents with supportive others to ensure that gains made in middle school will not be lost in high school (Chapman, 2001)." The results of the study were that incoming at risk students had higher attendance rates, better performance scores, and a willingness to become those 11th grade mentors for a new class of incoming freshman (Chapman, 2001).

However, just as in the Smith (1997) study, our school district fails to offer support systems geared for teachers and parents. The existing structure for parents of children entering high school is similar to the affects of the Smith (1997) study, but lacks the lasting effects of the Newman and Myers (2000) study. Timber Creek High School offers parents an open house visit prior to the start of school and an eighth grade parent meeting with administration. However, Timber Creek has not evolved its parental support program to include enrichment activities for parents while the student is in ninth grade. Furthermore, teachers at both the middle high school do not communicate effectively in regards to curriculum changes and content area skill based requirements or expectations. The school administration has tried in years past to have articulation sessions with middle and high school teachers that have faltered. The focus of this study is to formulate a transition program targeting teachers of both middle and high school content areas through articulation and effective communication avenues.

Research has shown that given familiar support systems and added reassurance early in their high school careers, students can adjust comfortably, making their transition a successful endeavor. “Providing young adolescents with activities that relate directly to their transition into high school certainly is important; however, providing young adolescents with a challenging and supportive middle school experience is equally important factor (Mizelle, 1999).” Smith (1997) concurs by adding that public school students who went through a comprehensive transition program available to them in middle school were less likely to drop out in high school and performed better in high school than did students who did not go through a transition program at all.

Chapter 3

The Design of the Study

General Description of the Research Design

The transition program at Timber Creek High School in the Black Horse Pike Regional School District does offer transition support for students, by meeting with counselors, coaches, teachers, and administrative staff prior to the start of school. However, more concentrated efforts were needed for teachers from both the middle and high school. Those efforts included articulation sessions and in-service, collaborative time to exchange ideas, expectations, and materials for instruction.

Teachers and administrators often rely on research data to make informed decisions in the process of building an effective learning community. The intern used an action based research model. The gathered data from this study will enhance the commitment made to improve students' transition from middle school to high school. Timber Creek High School, with a student population of 1,200 students and 80 staff members, and Mullen Middle School, with a student population of 800 and staff population of 50 members, will be the focal points for gathering data.

This was a coordinated effort the receiving and sending school districts to alleviate achievement loss associated with the transition into high school for ninth graders. The intern applied ISSLC standard II: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

Description of the Development and Design

A balance of quantitative research and organization was used to conduct this study. The intern gathered data by utilizing a survey after teacher in-services in three different instructional departments: math, social studies, and English. The surveys measured the effectiveness of communication between teachers during and after in-services and the impact the attempted communication has had on daily teaching practices.

See Appendix A for research instrument.

The intern will evaluate current methods of communication between the two schools and justify the need for more efficient means of communication by introducing ninth grade student achievement results from the past three years. The intern attempted to turn a pattern of achievement loss around with the introduction of more efficient communication between Timber Creek High School and Mullen Middle School.

The articulation session was designed to allow staff members from the middle and high schools to share their concerns and implement classroom practices born from conversations. The in-service session also provided an opportunity to exchange ideas and materials for improving the performance of students in ninth grade. It also provided a forum for sharing school and classroom expectations in hopes that both schools would mimic similar plans. Approximately, forty staff members from both schools attended the in-service articulation sessions.

The intern applied ISSLC IV: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interest and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

Description of Sample and Technique

The population was approximately 40 teachers varying in years of service and across content area of expertise. The surveys were distributed between math, history, and English teachers from both the middle and high school levels. At the end of both in-service sessions, a survey was distributed to all participants, in all three instructional departments. The participants completed the survey and returned them to the intern within a week. Action Research is a process designed to empower all participants in the educational process with the means to improve the practices conducted within the educational experience (McMillan, 2000). The model for Action Research is cyclical in nature and is intended to foster a deeper understanding of a given situation, starting with conceptualizing and particularizing the problem and moving through several interventions and evaluations (Mills, 2000).

The researcher has employed the steps outlined in the Action Research model. The planning, communication, and the implementation of articulation sessions between the middle and high schools helped to increase the amount of data to be analyzed and to improve a greater understanding of achievement loss associated between Mullen Middle School and Timber Creek High School. The researcher gathered ninth grade performance data from Timber Creek High School's Guidance Department and planned to collect eighth grade performance data from Mullen Middle School. Mullen officials indicated they would release the data at their convenience. Action occurs as the intern coordinates further investigation and in-service sessions (Mills, 2000). Observations occur at the in-service sessions and between the communication with Mullen Middle School and Timber Creek High School.

Data Collection Approach

The intern analyzed data in two different stages. The first stage involved determining whether or not there was a case for initiating more efficient means of communication by examining ninth grade students' achievement levels over the past two years. The intern gathered that data from the Guidance Office (see Table 7).

Table 7

Timber Creek Regional High School's Ninth Grade Performance

Ninth Grade Performance:		2001					2002				
Final grade	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>	<u>F</u>	
English	54	148	137	103	18	59	147	135	73	34	
History	61	151	145	91	12	65	151	128	77	27	
Math	46	131	169	92	22	46	134	147	91	30	

The achievement levels were unsatisfactory and the intern had cause for pursuing the next stage of data collection. After each in-service of teacher communication, the intern distributed surveys to measure the effectiveness of the in-services and the impact they have had on daily practices. The intern encouraged all participants to answer honestly, so to foster a true understanding of the needs required to build effective communication between the two schools. Ultimately, the data will be analyzed with the intention to 'build a bridge' over the communication gap between Timber Creek High School and Mullen Middle School.

Data Analysis Plan

The evidence gathered through this research will impact the future of the students entering Timber Creek High School, the teachers at the middle and high schools, and the learning community as a whole. The intern will determine the teachers' thirst for further articulation and the effectiveness of the sessions by comparing the survey results.

The analysis of future ninth grade scores to measure the impact of teacher training will extend beyond the time limits of this study. Crucial to the success of the research plan is to measure students' performance scores in the coming years to accurately assess the impact of the articulation sessions. This research study will initiate the action plan designed to change teachers' practices and as a result, improve students' performance from middle to high school.

Chapter 4

Presentation of the Research Findings

Introduction

The internship project took place from July 1, 2003 to April 2004 at Timber Creek Regional High School in Erial, New Jersey. The researcher implemented strategies to reduce achievement loss associated with the transition between Mullen Middle School, Gloucester Township Public School's sending institution, and Timber Creek Regional High School. The intern achieved a secondary objective by improving communication avenues between teachers within specific subject concentrations between the two schools. Through the analysis of ninth grade performance data and discussions among teachers, the researcher concluded that articulation sessions were needed to bridge the achievement loss between districts. The researcher established meeting times during staff in-services and procured a movement towards improving instruction, collaboration, and developing similar behavioral management schemes and classroom disciplinary actions. The primary goal was to develop common threads of providing an education intertwined to create a comfortable transition from Mullen Middle School to Timber Creek High School.

The intern, on behalf of Black Horse Pike Regional School District, coordinated the articulation sessions and pre-synchronization, plus post summary meetings. The articulation sessions were conducted in collaboration with Mullen Middle School teachers in three specific content fields: English, history, and mathematics. These training sessions were introduced for the purpose of building equity between the two school districts.

At the behest of the school district's upper administration, the target purposes were to build stronger working relationships between the two schools, constructively resolve growing concerns, like discipline implementation, and improve teaching methodologies for the benefit of student performance in ninth grade. Teaching methodologies were exchanged, discipline strategies were developed to overcome differences between the two schools, and student performance expectations were outlined. Both teacher groups had a better understanding of each other's frustrations, schools' management scheme, and dissolved any negative notions about either school. The intern built a healthier working relationship by bringing the two schools together; one in which the success of each school became dependent on that relationship.

In addition to the positive relationship growth, the researcher enabled teachers from both schools share ideas towards the pursuit of strong learning environments. One of the intern's objectives revolved around forming common themes or bonds between the two schools, so students could easily make a transition from one environment, leaving eighth grade, into a very similar environment upon entering high school in ninth grade. The discussions within the articulation session helped reach that goal. As a result of the discussions, teachers were made aware of the differences and drafted solutions to foster commonalities between the two schools.

Another component used in obtaining the usefulness of the articulation sessions and the reception of the process was a survey instrument distributed to all teachers having gone through the articulation sessions in math, history, and English disciplines. (See Appendix A). The primary goal of the survey was to gather feedback regarding the articulation sessions.

Another aim was whether relations between the two schools improved as a result of the articulation session. Yet another goal was to measure the impact the articulation sessions had on teaching methodologies and the receptiveness of opening up future discussions between Mullen Middle School and Timber Creek High School. All ten survey instrument questions were instrumental in collecting data that will be used in the succeeding meetings and further discussions among colleagues. Some of the questions measured the effectiveness of the articulation session in order to gauge the need for further articulation sessions. While some questions stimulated thoughts on past pedagogical practices, others sought to measure the need for improvement of relations between the two school districts. These surveys along with the articulation session discussions were the basis for refining relations between school districts for the improvement of student performance from middle to high school.

Research Findings

The survey instrument was sent to three content disciplines, math, history, and English departments, in both the middle and high school after the articulation sessions were held.

It was conducted so that the researcher could retain information that:

- rated the teachers' articulation experience,
- rated the presentation's general purpose and worth,
- determined if another articulation session was needed to help improve relations and enhance student performance,
- established if the articulation session promoted teacher growth,
- confirmed whether the articulation sessions were good catalysts that encouraged a review of current school expectations.

The history department's articulation session returned 10 completed surveys. The math and English departments both returned 13 survey's each. Out of 42 possible department members from both Mullen and Timber Creek, 36 surveys were returned. The following are the results of these surveys.

Table 8 below suggests all 13 respondents favored the articulation session and measured its worth in varying degrees as each question was posed. Based on the mean scores per question, the researcher determined key information from the English Department. The first question asked whether the *“in-service provided information that had not previously been known.”* Nine of the thirteen respondents recorded ‘very effective’ as their response, and the remaining four respondents rated their experience as ‘valuable’. In questions three and four, the survey asks if the in-service *“provided a basis for how to better obtain information from my colleagues’ school”* and *“if there was sufficient time allotted for uncovering differences and creating solutions to problems.”* Again, positive responses were recorded with average scores suggesting respondents found the in-service ‘valuable’ and ‘very effective’.

Table 8
English Departments’ Responses Aggregated with Mean Scores

English Surveys	Average Score Per Question
Question 1	3.692308
Question 2	3.461538
Question 3	3.307692
Question 4	3.230769
Question 5	3.923077
Question 6	3.083333
Question 7	2.666667
Question 8	3.769231
Question 9	2.846154
Question 10	3.769231

Similar responses and mean scores were recorded with the history department survey after the articulation session was conducted. In Table 9 below, mean scores were aggregated per question for history department’s responses. Most respondents were pleased with the articulation session’s goals and implementation. In fact, all respondents rated the articulation session’s purpose as ‘very effective’ and found the *“in-service provided an atmosphere for sharing ideas and possibilities”* and *“the in-service initiated the beginnings of key relationship(s) with Mullen/Timber Creek”*. Teachers even assessed the articulation session’s impact on the proposition introduced in question eight, *“the in-service encouraged me to be open to a teacher exchange program”*, as ‘very effective’.

Table 9

History Departments’ Responses Aggregated with Mean Scores

History Surveys	Average Score Per Question
Question 1	3.7
Question 2	3.9
Question 3	3.8
Question 4	3.7
Question 5	4
Question 6	3.6
Question 7	3.2
Question 8	4
Question 9	3.2
Question 10	4

The math department’s responses were also similar. As aggregated in Table 10 below, the math department favored the articulation session and found its purpose ‘very effective’, too. The math department’s participants rated the articulation session as ‘valuable’ to ‘very effective’ in nine out of the ten questions. The weakest responses were recorded regarding changing methods and techniques in the classroom.

Table 10

Math Departments' Responses Aggregated with Mean Scores

Math Surveys	Average Score Per Question
Question 1	3.384615
Question 2	3.461538
Question 3	3.076923
Question 4	3.5
Question 5	3.923077
Question 6	3.307692
Question 7	3.076923
Question 8	3.230769
Question 9	2.923077
Question 10	3.769231

In Table 11 below, the researcher aggregated the mean scores of all three departments to uncover any commonalities and areas of concern for the next articulation session, if needed. The mean scores in the following table, along with the discussions, produced in the articulation sessions, will enable the researcher to draw conclusions about the worthwhile attempts to convince teachers in both school districts to take part in a collaborative effort to improve student performance from eighth to ninth grade.

Table 11

Average Scores of All Three Instructional Departments Conducting Articulation Sessions

All Departments	Average for Each Question
Question 1	3.592307667
Question 2	3.607692
Question 3	3.394871667
Question 4	3.476923
Question 5	3.948718
Question 6	3.330341667
Question 7	2.981196667
Question 8	3.666666667
Question 9	2.989743667
Question 10	3.846154

Subsequently, the data in Table 11 defines the ability of teachers in both school districts to collaboratively reduce the achievement loss associated with the transition from the middle school to high school. The discussions in the articulation session were aimed towards overlooking differences in teaching methods and crafting communication lines designed to improve student performance. Crucial to the success of forming a good relationship is question ten: “*This in-service initiated the beginnings of key relationship(s) with Mullen/Timber Creek*”. Respondents assessed the articulation session as being ‘valuable’ to ‘very effective’ in achieving initial harmony between Mullen Middle School and Timber Creek High School. The articulation session opened up new avenues of communication needed before any solid performance improvements can be manufactured. By sharing ideas, as measured in question five (mean score of 3.948718), Timber Creek and Mullen Middle School can begin to form common student expectations, classroom management schemes, and discipline codes. Thus making the transition from eighth to ninth grade more similar and easier to adjust for students.

However, participants noted a ‘somewhat helpful’ response in regards to questions seven and nine. The articulation session did not effectively allow teachers to exchange methodologies and techniques they could use, nor were teachers given the opportunity to change any pedagogical practices as a result of the in-service. Consequently, avenues were opened to allow for the exchange of ideas, but many may not have been applicable to the grade level or topic. Therefore, the researcher concluded that there was a need to bring teachers from both schools together again in order to exchange pedagogical ideas, methods of delivery, and general classroom practices. The intern will build on this initial relationship to bring harmony to both schools.

Evidenced by the data in questions two and three, teachers came out of the in-service with a better understanding of each other's school district and the operational procedures in the way of effective change. Through the discussions generated in the articulation sessions and the responses to question six, "*This in-service will allow me to collaborate more frequently with Mullen/Timber Creek*", the researcher gathered teachers were more likely as a result of the articulation session to utilize a positive relationship with the other school district in order to improve teaching methods. In turn, the response from teachers was strong enough to suggest teachers were looking forward to other meetings in the name of enhancing student performance.

The researcher's main objective was to alleviate achievement loss associated with the transition from middle to high school. Designing articulation sessions and initiating discussions with the middle school was the first step in 'bridging' the achievement gap between the middle and high school. At the conclusion of the articulation sessions, the researcher observed and verified through survey results that teachers in the two districts needed further collaboration to better understand the underlying causes of achievement loss and to initiate conversations resulting in healthier teacher performance and, subsequently, improved student performance.

With an 85% return rate, the researcher determined that faculty members involved were interested in pursuing further discussions and experimenting with different formats to bring the two school districts together. As ideas were exchanged in the articulation sessions, teachers shared thoughts aimed at conceiving a collective partnership between the two schools. This partnership fostered a commitment towards common school district goals and expectations for students and faculty.

The researcher intends to employ the enthusiasm displayed during the discussions to propel a partnership designed to help students succeed after transitioning to high school. Without the ideas of Mullen Middle School and Timber Creek teachers, the researcher would be hard pressed to convince administration that strategies needed to be developed in order to tackle this burdening issue.

Nonetheless, given the results from the survey implementation and the articulation sessions' initial successes, the researcher can conclude that it is necessary for both schools to continue to build a collective partnership with its aim at alleviating achievement loss associated with the transition from Mullen Middle School to Timber Creek High School. As a result of the researcher's groundwork, the foundation has been set for continued progress towards improving student performance.

Chapter 5

Conclusions, Implications, and Further Study

Conclusions

The review of the results was conducted in March 2004. The purpose was to identify the effectiveness of strategies introduced to improve communication between Timber Creek High School and Mullen Middle School. The articulation session's aim was to bring teachers from both school together for the purpose of alleviating achievement loss associated with the transition from Mullen Middle School to Timber Creek High School. Furthermore, the researcher was measuring the validity of holding future articulation sessions between the two schools. The project conclusions will help assist Timber Creek Regional High School and Mullen Middle School enhance teacher skills and practices and, as a result, improve student performance. Due to the efforts of this project, as well as the continued labors in bringing Mullen Middle School and Timber Creek High School together, ninth grade performance will progress forward.

The researcher found the major conclusions through collected survey instruments and communication with faculty from Timber Creek and Mullen Middle Schools, that articulation sessions between the two schools was the first successful step towards cross-district harmony. The survey's concluded that teachers found the articulation session meaningful and a positive beginning to a key relationship between the two school districts. Furthermore, the researcher concluded faculty from both schools invited more articulation sessions to adopt commonalities, enhance teaching strategies, and promote a shared vision to improve ninth grade performance.

The meetings between the researcher and the head teacher from Mullen Middle School proved to be essential to the success and implementation of the program. The collaboration between Mullen Middle School's head teacher and the researcher fostered an initial drive for cooperation among staff members. Within our meetings, a design of the in-service session took form and focused towards higher standards of delivering an education. Given the focus, the researcher executed an articulation session, for both history departments, full of collaborative ideas. By providing a purpose and forum for discussion, the teachers in both schools attained a clearer sense of duty for their students. This, in turn, will lead to positive performance growth throughout a students' high school career.

Perhaps the most distinctive conclusions drawn by the researcher resulted from the articulation session. As a result of in-service session, the two schools were better able to communicate in the future and initiated the building of a common bond between school districts. The session allowed faculty to enhance their awareness of culpability between schools and heightened their acknowledgment that the two faculties needed to work together in order to improve student performance. They learned differences and built the first steps in resolving those differences. By bringing the two schools closer, the researcher has enabled the focus to be placed strictly on student performance. These were important steps towards effectively bridging the achievement gap between Mullen Middle School and Timber Creek High School. The need for further cross-district articulation sessions was evidenced and future planned changes were agreed upon. Staffs at both schools agreed to contribute to the discussions in the future and were open to changing existing barriers between the two school districts.

The researcher has exhibited numerous leadership dimensions throughout the practicum experience. Leadership characteristics were demonstrated through organization and communication with Mullen Middle School and Timber Creek High School's faculty. These leadership qualities include, the ability to organize faculty articulation sessions and gather feedback from the in-service. The researcher used the data to determine the need for change and form solutions.

The researcher used effective written and oral communication skills to inform teachers and administration of the ongoing developments and outcomes of the articulation sessions. The researcher met formally and informally with faculty members from both schools and administration to meet their needs and report the projects findings. The continuation of planned change to the relationship between Mullen Middle School and Timber Creek High School will further expand and strengthen the researcher's leadership skills and contribute to the development of other leader attributes. The researcher intends to focus on ongoing improvements and refinements of all leadership skills in the areas of organization, problem solving, communication, and interpersonal qualities.

Implications

As a result of the research conducted, literature reviewed, and drawn conclusions, the need for future articulation session between Mullen Middle School and Timber Creek High School was verified. Thus, the continuation of faculty in-service meetings, data reevaluation, clear communication between the two school districts, and necessary changes was warranted. The intern continued to build on this research and organized additional articulation sessions in order to gather more data.

The project and results was shared with both Mullen Middle School's and Timber Creek High School's administrative teams and faculty to justify the effectiveness of the first articulation session and the need for continued collaboration between the two schools. The researcher, along with administrations, facilitated further staff discussions between the two schools. Thereby, common goals and expectations were formed and shared with students. As a result of this partnership, students will be better prepared for ninth grade especially, and high school on the whole.

Further Study

In order to make an all-encompassing argument, the researcher needs to continue collecting data from Mullen Middle School and Timber Creek High School and report any findings to administration. The researcher will continue proposing staff articulation sessions aimed at improving faculty and student expectations and performance.

At the project's core was the notion that ninth grade students were not performing to the level of Timber Creek High School's expectations. Further studies, which benefit the next class of freshman and eighth grade students, will be conducted with continued literature reviews and the acquisition of more student performance data. The researcher will continue to clear an open-line of communication between the two school districts. By serving as a liaison between Mullen Middle School, Timber Creek High School, and the communities they serve, ongoing changes will require the researcher to be highly visible and interactive with staffs, administrations, and student bodies.

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Appendix A
Research Instrument

Using a Likert scale arrangement, rate the following on a scale of 1 to 4.

- 1= not useful at all
- 2 = somewhat helpful
- 3= valuable
- 4 = very effective

1. This in-service provided information that I had not previously known.
1 2 3 4
2. Through meeting cross-district staff, I understand the K-12 educational systems better.
1 2 3 4
3. This in-service provided a basis for how to better obtain information from my colleagues' school.
1 2 3 4
4. The time that was allotted for uncovering differences and creating solutions to problems was sufficient.
1 2 3 4
5. This in-service provided an atmosphere for sharing ideas and possibilities.
1 2 3 4
6. This in-service will allow me to collaborate more frequently with Mullen/Timber Creek.
1 2 3 4
7. This in-service allowed me to discover some methodologies and techniques I can use.
1 2 3 4
8. This in-service encouraged me to be open to a teacher exchange program.
1 2 3 4
9. I have the opportunity to change my pedagogical practices as a result of the in-service interaction and exchange of ideas.
1 2 3 4
10. This in-service initiated the beginnings of key relationship with Mullen/Timber Creek.
1 2 3 4

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