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The Failings of Ninth Grade: Causes, Effects and Solutions at a Traditional and Alternative High School

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The Failings of Ninth Grade

**Causes, Effects and Solutions
at a
Traditional and Alternative High School**

EMPA 396 Graduate Research Project in Public Management

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Abstract

Ninth grade, a pivotal transition year, identified as the grade with the highest failure rate than any other grade, directly affects high school graduation, dropout, and repetition rates. Administrators and teachers recognize the crisis that is occurring within the ninth grade but have been unable to address the myriad of variables that cause the failures. Some schools have found success by restructuring ninth grade into a small school academy, isolating the students from the main population in order to create a more nurturing environment. Other schools have utilized team teaching, where a group of teachers shares the same group of students. This allows the teachers to collaborate to assist any student who is having difficulty.

This study explores the variables that contribute to failures, whether the solutions are working, and whether these solutions can be implemented locally. We will look specifically at Alternative High School (AHS), a high school in the Twin Rivers School District, Sacramento, California. This school offers students the opportunity to make up credits at an accelerated pace from classes that were failed at a traditional high school. This is a “band-aid” and not a fix to the problems generated by ninth grade failures. We will also explore Traditional Joint Union High School (TJHS), a high school that is struggling from a significant rate of ninth grade failures.

Chapter 1 ~ Introduction

“How can a child have his or her proudest moment and greatest failure in the space of a summer?” Searching for the answer to this question provided the impetus for conducting this study. I am a mentor at an alternative high school, commonly known as a continuation school, a school where they send students that have had difficulties. The other mentors and I pondered this question after interviewing several students. In the interviews, students were asked, “What was your proudest moment?” and “What was your greatest failure?” More than a majority responded that their proudest moment was graduating eighth grade and their greatest failure was failing ninth grade. How could this be, what happened to take these students from their highest point to their lowest in the span of a summer? School officials were aware of this matter but seemed desensitized to the issue, it was business as normal for them. Thus began the quest to answer what was causing ninth grade failures and how to resolve this issue.

The 2001 No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB)¹ enacted to improve the quality of education in the United States has not sufficiently addressed the problems for students, especially ninth graders. The purpose of NCLB was to create an environment where students reached learning goals in order to close the achievement gap. The legislation tasked school districts with raising standards of proficiency, so students in economically disadvantaged areas did not lag behind other students. Schools immediately implemented more standardized testing, worked to reduce class sizes, and focused on meeting state proficiency goals.

¹ <http://www.education.com/reference/article/purpose-no-child-left-behind/>

Unfortunately, despite the lofty goals of the NCLB, students continue to face many of the problems that the legislation was enacted to address, especially those in the ninth grade. The ninth grade is identified as the grade with the highest failure rate of any of the other grades. Researchers assert that lack of preparation in the eighth grade, behavior issues, and absenteeism are contributing factors in ninth grade failure rates. A 2004 Boston College study revealed that the “rate in which ninth grade students do not reach tenth grade has tripled in the past thirty years” (Cooper 2011). This is an indicator that the NCLB did little to benefit students. The rate of failures has progressively gone up over the years prior to and after the enacting of NCLB.

Background and History

In the United States, 7000² students drop out of high school every day. In California 546,097 students enter ninth grade but statistics show that only 514,289³ students enter tenth grade. Experts call ninth grade “the bottle neck year,” because ninth grade can get an influx of students, about ten percent more than eighth grade, but the drop-out rate going into tenth grade can be as high as twelve percent. In addition, the high level of students having to repeat the ninth grade contributes to the high population in ninth grade courses. These, along with other indicators such as poor ninth grade math and reading scores, absenteeism, and behavior issues, cause students to

² http://www.sreb.org/page/1095/high_schools.html

³ http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013309/tables/table_01.asp

drop out of school in higher numbers after ninth grade and many students never return to the school setting. This has a directly negative impact on graduation success rates.

Reducing the barriers that exist for ninth grade students will have a direct impact on achieving increased high school graduation success. Research has shown that schools that implemented programs, specifically small ninth grade academies, to address failures have seen a reduction in dropout rates from twenty-four percent down to eight percent (Cooper 2011). This demonstrates the benefit of addressing the issues in ninth grade on the success of students in their high school career. There is also a significant societal benefit when students graduate from high school.

School districts and administrators recognize the crisis that is occurring within the ninth grade and the benefit of addressing the issues, but have been unable to address the myriad of variables that cause the failures. There are many bureaucratic challenges preventing the necessary changes to address ninth grade failures also. These challenges include lack of supporting data at the local and state level. The lack of data stems from no common methodologies in measuring graduation rates and no systematic monitoring to “identify students who may be off-track early in their high school careers” (Herlihy, 2007). The NCLB looked to reward schools who were meeting standards, which may account for why much of the data is lacking. This also explains why ninth grade failures have been allowed to progressively rise over the last thirty years and no national outcry has occurred.

School districts are also challenged in addressing the diverse instructional needs of students. Forced to produce students prepared for college level courses, yet

challenged with the reality that up to one third of the entering freshmen are not working at grade level in core courses such as math and English.

Purpose of Study

This study examines two different types of high schools in the Twin Rivers Unified School District (TRUSD), Sacramento, California. One, Alternative (name has been changed for confidentiality) High School (AHS), is an alternative or continuation high school. Many of the students attending AHS have been unsuccessful in attending traditional schools due in part to failures in ninth grade. The other is Traditional (name has been changed for confidentiality) Joint Union High School, a traditional high school. About 60% of the students who attend AHS transferred from TJHS. This study will explore the potential fixes to the problem of ninth grade failures and the possible implementation of those fixes into the TRUSD, specifically at TJHS and AHS.

Through interviews of principals, teachers and registrars, this study will reveal the number of students that are failing ninth grade within these schools, what programs are currently available to address the failures, and what programs are planned to address the failures moving forward. Through surveys of students and parents, this study will reveal what went wrong to result in a ninth grade failure. We will also explore what those who experienced ninth grade failure can teach us moving forward.

Significance of Study

In California, about seventy-eight percent⁴ of students graduate from high school within four years, leaving twenty-two percent or about 93,000 students left to face the economic hardship of being a high school dropout. Some of these students will go on to receive a General Education Diploma (GED), but almost five percent of students who drop out will never obtain a diploma or a GED. The societal burden from lack of employment and unrealized tax revenue from students who never graduate from high school is about \$200 Billion⁵ during a dropout's lifetime. These problems are so much more than simply getting a sheet of paper at the end of high school.

For many, the problems began in ninth grade due to variables like family dynamics (i.e. Divorce or abuse); the transition from middle school to high school; chronic absenteeism; and lack of preparation leading to failure in key subjects such as math and English. These variables resulting in ninth grade failures have a direct impact on repetition rates, graduation rate, and ultimately drop out rates. Ninth grade failure continues to be a national problem, and is evident locally at TRUSD. Fortunately, many other schools have found success for students by restructuring ninth grade at traditional high schools. We will explore examples of restructuring, interview principals, survey students, and parents, to determine if this is a possible fix within TRUSD.

⁴ <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013309rev.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/statistics/quick-facts/economic-impacts-dropouts>

Chapter 2 ~ Literature Review

There were several themes discovered in this review of scholarly articles and studies. The three main themes reviewed in this study included: (1) the causes of ninth grade failures; (2) program changes to address ninth grade failures; and (3) the public policy challenges that hinder the school districts. Each theme is reviewed separately below to show individual importance and relevance to this research project.

The causes of ninth grade failures appear to be very common across the board, no matter the part of the country or the demographics of the school. The first cause is poor academic preparation in the middle school years resulting in the ninth grader not acquiring the skills necessary to pass ninth grade math and English. These core courses present the earliest warning signs that a ninth grader is struggling and heading toward failure. Adequate preparation in math and English establish the foundation of academic success in the later grades. According to the literature, a shift toward more rigorous college prep style courses occurred at the high school level and many students were unprepared for the transition from the more nurturing style of middle school (Neild, 2009).

Absenteeism is another major cause of ninth grade failures. One study showed 45.1% of ninth grade students were chronically absent (Mac Iver, 2012). Failing to attend class directly affects a student's ability to successfully complete a course. The literature points to family issues, such as domestic violence, and a lack of parental supervision as factors in chronic absenteeism. This lack of supervision means that parents are not aware that their student is not attending school and often learn of the

problem when it has been referred to a truancy officer, often very late in the school semester. Even if parents do learn of the problem, the student may be so far behind in their work that they are unable to pass the class, causing a fail.

Behavior issues are the last cause that research has shown to play a role in ninth grade failures. Students going into the ninth grade have not matured passed acting out in response to the frustrations they may encounter in their new high school environment. Clowning around and other immature behavior may cause a student to face the possibility of suspension. Suspensions contribute to a student being out of class and potentially not passing. The literature overwhelmingly supports the relationships between failed courses, absenteeism and behavior issues as major contributors of ninth grade failings.

The next theme of the literature review is solutions to address the causes for ninth grade failures. One solution is to make academic changes to elementary grades so that by the time a student reaches ninth grade they are prepared for the course work. The course material needs to be more challenging and geared toward college preparation early on so that the transition from middle school academics is smooth. If Schools created a transition program, eighth graders would have a better understanding of what expected of them in ninth grade. Another change would be to identify eighth graders who are demonstrating early warning signs of failure and address whatever is causing them to have struggles before they go off to ninth grade.

Another solution is transforming ninth grade into small separate academies so students receive more individualized attention. These academies would be designed to also transition students to higher levels. Some academies are located within the

general school setting and others academies separated from the main population of high school students. The idea is to mimic the supportive and nurturing environment that students receive in middle and elementary school in the high school setting. This solution requires a buy-in from the teachers, students and community to be successful (Ellerbrock and Kiefer, 2010; McCallumore and Sparapani, 2010).

The last solution supported by the literature is team teaching. The idea behind this solution is to keep ninth grade students with the same group of teachers. The theory is that the teachers will be able to work together to identify students struggling early and brainstorm together to help the student. This solution can be utilized within the small academies or with the general population of a regular high school setting (Habeeb, 2013). This approach requires a great deal of buy-in from teachers as they may be asked to give more of their time and effort than their peers do. Teachers must recognize there is a problem and commit to being part of the solution.

The final theme within the literary review is public policy; what the state and national governments are doing. The research shows that reliable numbers such as dropout, repetition, and graduation rates are calculated using unreliable methodologies and are often misrepresented at the state government level. The lack of reliable measures makes it difficult to establish monitoring and accountability systems, necessary to past effective legislation. The focus generated from the 2001, No Child Left Behind legislation has waned in the pool of public opinion and has not been a driving force in addressing these challenges faced by ninth graders.

The following is a summary of some of the literature included in this research. Ruth Curran Neild, in her article "Falling off Track During the Transition to High School:

What We Know and What Can Be Done” (2009), summarizes the problems she believes lead to ninth graders falling off track and some policy changes to address the issues. Neild first defines what it means to be “off track” in the ninth grade. She then discusses the importance of ninth grade success, and how ninth grade success contributes to high school graduation rates. She then delves into several variables that lead to failure in the ninth grade. This article encapsulates the very issue of the research topic I have selected. The issue of ninth grade failures being a predictor of graduation success, the variables that lead to the failures and the policy changes and restructures that address the issues, is exactly the type of research I hope to build upon. Neild’s research appears to be thorough, applicable, and current.

Mary Ann Cooper, in her article, “9th Grade – Make or Break for High School Success” (2011), she reports on the findings of the Hanover Research Group’s report that discusses the refocus on ninth grade and how it plays a pivotal part in a high school student’s academic success after high school. Cooper cites that enrollment in tenth grade is about 12% lower than enrollment in ninth grade. This enrollment gap is twice the rate as it was thirty years ago. Cooper also points out the disparity is greater when race is an added factor. According to Cooper, “One in four African-American, Native American, and Hispanic students do not successfully complete ninth grade the first time around, and have to repeat it.” Although the aspect of racial disparities is not a topic this paper addresses, the article ties into this research as it addresses some of the causes of ninth grade failures as well as reviewing two restructuring programs. Cooper examines how these restructured ninth grade programs specifically approach improving

success factors. These improvements include block scheduling, team teaching, and a clear focus on student success.

Cheryl R. Ellerbrock and Sarah M. Kiefer in their article, "Creating a Ninth-Grade Community of Care" (2010), examined the argument for a restructured program for ninth grade. This program, Freshman Focus, was created to develop a nurturing relationship, where both the teacher and student have a vested interest in the program. The authors also looked at investigations on how "comprehensive high schools attempt to promote a supportive community for students but found that many high schools are organized in ways that are counterproductive to promoting caring relationships and a deep sense of belonging." This article illustrates the success of restructuring ninth grade into a freshman community of care. Its research, data analysis, and results support looking at this program as a viable option for the issues occurring at TRUSD. At the center of the components that made this program successful is the promotion of care and as a community, that is what we should be striving to demonstrate to our students.

Scott Habeeb's article "The Ninth-Grade Challenge" also presents the argument for restructuring ninth grade into either a freshman academy or utilizing teams of teachers. The teaming model works with a group of teachers who share the same students and are able to meet and discuss the needs of those students. This concept will allow the teachers to come up with creative ways to encourage success amongst the students. Habeeb's article, like Ellerbrock and Kiefer's, stressed the importance of creating a nurturing and supportive environment for the students. Habeeb also asserts, "If a school wants to have an impact on its freshmen, it must first ensure that teachers are at the core." Habeeb points out that due to the high level of resources necessary in

setting up a freshmen academy, the teaming model may be the most efficient route for schools to take.

Rana Foroohar in her article, “The Diploma That Works,” features a unique solution to many of the issues facing high schools today, not just ninth grade failures. This article looks at Sarah E. Goode High School, located on the south side of Chicago. This 21st century school is an example of a partnership between IBM and the school district to offer a six-year high school program. Upon graduation, students have not only a high school diploma, but also an associate degree and an offer of a job. The idea to connecting earning an education with gaining employment is not new, vocational study has been a part of American education since 1900. However, sometime in the 1960’s vocational study became second rate to a traditional education and today very few schools even offer vocational programs.

The additional two years of this program and the push toward the science, technological, engineering and math (stem) programs have seen much success with an increase test scores and raised graduation rates. Students are offered a program they can buy into that is unique for them and by bringing industry closer to the student they can see the payout; getting a very good paying job. Although this article does not specifically address ninth grade failures, it does address the benefits of creating small school academies, the successes they have had, and the next wave of educational reform. Currently, this program is being replicated in two states at 29 schools and has the backing of leaders such as President Obama.

The literature on ninth grade failure, causes, and solutions indicate that there is significant research on this subject, despite the slow movement toward change. The

statistics on graduation; drop out; and repetition rates have been independently compiled and are available for schools, their districts, and the states to implement changes that address the needs of the students, yet the data also illustrates that despite the awareness of the problems, the rate of failures have climbed steadily over the past thirty years. The literature revealed many factors that contribute to ninth grade failures that are outside of the control of schools, districts and the states. Racial disparities, students with special needs and English learners are barriers to success not controlled by the schools. However, it is clear that the correct system in place can assist students to overcome those barriers.

Chapter 3 ~ Research Methodologies

This is a qualitative case study research that includes primary and secondary data collected from interviews, surveys and literature reviews. Pseudonyms are used to provide confidentiality and anonymity for participants in this study. AHS and TJHS were the schools of primary focus for the study. Data collected revealed if there was a problem with ninth grade failures at these high schools and suggest if the issues facing ninth grade failures described in the literature review are similar to what AHS and TJHS are experiencing. The data also revealed the solutions currently attempted to address the issues; and what solutions are available or planned to address ninth grade failures moving forward.

Interviews of the principals of the schools revealed what their impression is of the problems in ninth grade and what if anything they are doing to address the issues. The data will also explore what are the perceived obstacles administrators and school districts are facing. Interviews of the teachers will address what their perspective of the issues and what they would like to see changed.

Surveys of parents whose children have experienced ninth grade failure and have dropped out of high school or transferred to an alternative high school will capture what could have been done to help the student be successful from the parent's perspective. Surveying the parents will also provide insight on what role families play in the student's failure. Finally, we will survey the student in search of any insight gained from having failed ninth grade. The purpose of the student interview is to better understand what the student thinks could have been done differently.

Research Question and Sub-Questions

The following research question helped to guide this study: why are students leaving middle school feeling proud of their academic accomplishments and then to leave ninth grade experiencing failure? Students promote from middle school with a sense of academic accomplishment and then move into an unfamiliar environment not conducive toward their success. The new environment lacks the nurturing nature that students were accustomed in elementary and middle school. These students are generally ill-prepared for the rigor and pace of the workload. Compounded with their personal attempt to navigate a larger school campus; many students are set up for failure. A sense of failure has caused many students to have to attend alternative schools and eventually drop out of high school.

The research sub-question that helped guide this study further was: can restructuring ninth grade address these failures within TRUSD? Collecting and analyzing answers to this question helped provide a foundation for better understanding how implementing a small ninth grade academy at TJHS would help more students successfully graduate, by providing them a structured yet nurturing environment that prepares the student for the rigorous curriculum of high school. Team teaching allows teachers to collaborate to address concerns that may arise with a student. The more systems are in place to support and assist ninth graders, a greater decline in drop out and repetition rates.

Research Hypotheses

The hypothesis for this study is that restructuring ninth grade at a traditional high school such as TJHS in the TRUSD will lead to lower ninth grade failures and a commensurate reduction in continuation school enrollment at schools such as AHS. The literature shows that restructuring ninth grade into small academies have resulted in significant reductions in drop out and repetition rates. The literature also suggests team teaching as an option to address ninth grade failures. Restructuring ninth grade at TJHS with either of these options would likely produce a reduction in failures and directly affect the significant number of students who transfer to AHS. According to the literature, restructuring will produce an increase in the rate of successful graduations.

Data Collection Process Overview

Primary data was collected using a survey questionnaire and interview questions (see Appendix I. for list of interview questions and Appendix II. for the survey questionnaire). The goal of the surveys is to obtain data from the students on what elements they feel caused them to fail and what would have helped them succeed. Also learning from the parents what they think would have assisted their student in being more successful in ninth grade.

The administrator of AHS and the principal of TJHS were interviewed as well as two principals from high schools in different districts and socioeconomic areas. These interviews will be to gather data about what the causes, solutions, and changes

currently underway to address the issue of ninth grade failures. If there are no changes currently underway, what changes are feasible to put in place?

Independent and Dependent Variables Examined

In examining the causes of ninth grade failures, several independent variables contribute to the issues experienced in this critical year. Transition from middle school to high school presents some of the greatest concerns, because students are not prepared for the change. High schools tend to be larger communities with more rigorous curriculums and entering freshmen have not been properly prepared to navigate the new environment. In this new environment, freshmen need to navigate new experiences like knowing which courses to take and locating their assigned classrooms within a larger campus. Freshmen can easily become lost in the masses in high school. Once a student becomes lost, the frustrations and discouragements may occur causing the student to become disengaged and disinterested in school (Neild, 2009).

It is predicted that failure in key subjects such as math and English is another independent variable leading toward ninth grade failures. "Most high school dropouts fail at least 25% of their ninth grade courses" (Kennelly and Monrad, 2007). High School math and English are part of a new rigorous college curriculum introduced by high schools. This new curriculum is designed to better prepare the student for success in college; however many students enter high school without the skills to succeed.

Another prediction is family changes such as less parental supervision or dysfunctions in the family also have a direct impact on high school failures. Students are given more independence as part of a natural life transition and parents become lax on monitoring the student. Some students are unable to manage the newfound responsibility and it becomes evidence in their poor school performance. Another issue with families especially in economically depressed areas is dysfunction caused by drugs or domestic violence. Students exposed to the behaviors generated by dysfunction tend to begin to emulate what they have grown up seeing in their families.

Student's behaviors acted out at school are predicted to cause suspensions and eventually chronic absenteeism. Missed days of school directly affect a student's ability to successfully complete classes and obtain passing grades. Students forced to repeat a class or a whole grade are more likely to become discouraged with school and will consider dropping out.

It is predicted that the dependent variables arising from the identified independent variables are repetition, drop out, and graduation rates. Repetition rates rises due to course failures. Students must repeat courses in order to make up credits or hours needed to graduate. Repeating a course could cause a student to feel discouraged about attending school. For example a tenth grade student having to repeat a ninth grade English course may be embarrassed about being an older student in a class of freshmen. "Researchers at John Hopkins University found that up to 40% of ninth graders repeat the ninth grade, but only 10-15% of those repeaters go on to graduate" (Kennelly and Monrad, 2007). Developmentally students have a difficult time

dealing with the shame or embarrassment of repeating a course because they have not developed maturity to navigate those emotions.

A rise in repetition rates is an early warning sign of problems ahead. Repetition rates are directly tied to course failures. A failed course must be repeated as the course credits or hours are needed to count toward graduation. This is often the first time students have encountered a system where passing the course is a necessity in order to move ahead. Freshmen are often unprepared or unaware of the necessity of passing their classes and receiving full credit, because they have become accustomed to a system of social promotion. Social promotion, practiced mostly in elementary and middle schools, allows the student to advance a grade even though the student has not demonstrated mastery the subject matter.

It is likely students will drop out of high school because the amount of courses needing repeating becomes daunting. High school dropouts often only have accrued five percent of the credits needed to graduate when they enter tenth grade. Students entering the tenth grade face the reality of having to repeat the grade, which means they will be older than the other students will, and instead of facing the stigmas associated with failure, students drops out.

It is predicted that these dropouts greatly reduce the number of students who successful graduate in four years. As drop out rates rise, graduation rates fall and become a poor reflection on the school. Graduation rates are an “essential metric of student achievement and an educational system's success in preparing students for

college and career.”⁶ The ultimate result of ninth grade failures are that a many students going into adulthood having not been properly prepared in school.

Controlling for Internal and External Validity

Internal validity within this qualitative case study will be controlled for by utilizing triangulation of the data. Interviewing principals and teachers and surveying students and parents will provide a look at the situation of ninth grade failures from multiple views and perspectives. The plan is to look for common themes and solutions to the questions of what causes ninth grade failures and what solutions can be applied to the issue of ninth grade failures.

External validity will be controlled for by the use of a representative sample of students and parents from Alternative High School. The school has about 400 students enrolled so the goal will be to survey a minimum of ten percent. The students will be selected from tenth through twelfth grades with the common factor of all having failed at least one course in ninth grade. The parents in the study will be called randomly from the general population of Alternative. The hope is to have a large enough sample of parents whose child has failed a course in ninth grade. Although a majority of students at Alternative will meet these criteria, there are small percentages who are attending due to probation requirements or other behavioral issues.

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http://www.csba.org/GovernanceAndPolicyResources/~/_media/CSBA/Files/GovernanceResources/GovernanceBriefs/201305FactSheetJHSGGradRates.ashx

Operational Terms and Definitions

Alternative High School – an educational institution designed for students at-risk of not graduating, which offers students a flexible schedule and the ability to earn credits at a quicker pace.

Traditional High School – an educational institution providing secondary education leading to the awarding of a diploma to the students attending.

Failures – the inability to pass a course at a satisfactory level or credit for a course taken.

Success – passing a course at a satisfactory level or obtaining full credit for a course taken.

Restructuring – to change the organization and function of the ninth grade.

Poor graduation rates – The percentage of students that fail to graduate from high school within four years.

Increased dropout rates – the percentage of students that stop attending school prior to graduating.

Increased repetition rates – the percentage of ninth graders who have to repeat a course.

English learner – a student who is learning English as a second language.

Chapter 4 ~ Results and Findings

The results and findings for this study included data from interviews, surveys, and site visits. Interview data was comprised from principals from four schools in different school districts and socioeconomic areas. The principals provided valuable information on the problems of ninth grade failures. Parents and students were the sources for data from the surveys. The survey data provided a firsthand perspective from those students who actually have experienced ninth grade failures and from the parents of students who experienced ninth grade failures. Site visit data consisted of information garnered from a community forum.

Interview Data Results and Findings

Standing in the halls of TJHS, my alma mater, I felt a sense of timelessness, for a brief moment I was that frustrated and discouraged freshman, after walking out of the principal's office. I was told he was too busy to keep our scheduled interview and at that moment, I did not have a back-up plan in place for this scenario. I went home and got online, hoping to find some solution within social media. To my utter surprise, I found an announcement that the principal, (for the sake of confidentiality will be named Principal 1) will be at a community forum near my home the following week and I planned to be there front and center.

I attended the forum the following week and was very pleased that not only was Principal 1 in attendance but so was the district superintendent. Although ninth grade

failure was not a planned topic, they briefly touched on it while discussing high school graduation rates. After sitting through a very informative discussion, where parents, community members, and local politicians weighed in on the issues, I cornered Principal 1 to plead my case for an interview. After graciously accepting a Starbucks gift card and mug as a token of my appreciation, Principal 1 agreed to an interview on the following day.

On April 8, 2014, I sat down with TJHS's principal to discuss the issues of ninth grade failures. Principal 1 has only been principal at TJHS for a year, but has worked at the school for over fourteen years. He too had attended TJHS and returned to give back to the school and community. He spoke with pride over the programs the school offered, especially those designed to address the issue of ninth grade failures. He also spoke openly about the fact that the school fails to reach many students despite their best efforts.

Principal 1 stated he does believe ninth grade failures are a concern at TJHS. Principal 1 stated that about three years ago, Dr. Raja, a math teacher at TJHS researched and found that students who failed Algebra 1 are more likely to be unsuccessful in high school and drop out. In response to this research, TJHS created two programs to address specifically the failures in Algebra 1. The first is CREATE, a structured small school academy for entering freshmen who had a 2.0 grade point average or less upon promoting from middle school. Teachers were hand selected to offer a nurturing environment of study with the goal of no child fails.

These 150 students were placed in a small academy like setting, where they received a structured system of learning with daily goals. If the daily goals were not met

by the end of the instruction day, the child stays after school and keeps working. This program required significant buy-in from teachers, students, and parents, but the results correlate with the results found in the literature, success. These students not only demonstrated an ability to grasp the subject matter and thrive, but in many case began to outperform their peers who initially had higher grade point averages than the students in the program.

The second program is "DaPAC" (Pacers Achieving College) summer program, a partnership Dr. Raja developed with UC Davis. This intensive summer program takes 30-40 eighth graders who failed algebra and provides them with six weeks of intensive study. The program has seen great success with students testing above the California average in scores. The first class to participate in this program recently saw all its students graduate and go on to college.

Principal 1 stated that although 80% of the 600 freshmen graduate from one of the cohort programs (TJHS, AHS, or a small school academy), ninth grade failures continues to be a concern. He stated that there about 350 students who drop out and never graduate from school; with an entering freshmen class of 600 students, that rate is well above the national average. He acknowledges that there is still much work to do to address why there continues to be such a high drop out rate. One area that needs addressing is the major racial disparity among student success. African-American and Hispanic students continue to drop out of school at a significantly higher rate than their White and Asian counterparts. There is also a significant drop out rate amongst English learners.

He raises a few points that can be done to improve student success such as eliminating the system of social promotion, which allows students to benefit from failures in elementary and middle schools. He also notes the need to get rid of lack luster teachers who are not effective in the classroom. Last he states that we need to do more as a community to offer as many diverse learning environments for students as possible. TJHS is not the school for every student and the more options available for students' different learning styles, the more success we will see as a community.

On April 7, TRUSD's superintendent, spoke at a community forum to discuss delayed maintenance at TJHS but was also able to address academics. The superintendent announced that the district would be receiving about \$12 million from that state and although a majority of that money is earmarked to address the deferred maintenance, some of the funds will go toward student programs. A mentoring program for sixth through ninth graders, to help students better transition to high school is a planned. Another plan of the superintendent is the hiring of more high school counselors. Currently the ratio of counselor to student is 1:440 and the plan is to bring that down to 1:372, making the ratio lower than the state average.

The superintendent also spoke about implementing Common Core Standards, a state mandated change to the curriculum. California has joined 44 other states in adopting the Common Core Standards that is a description of what students should be learning from kindergarten through high school. The idea is that students get the same education, no matter what school they attend or state they live in⁷. The superintendent's hope is that these new core standards will raise the academic rigor

⁷ <http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/cc/tl/whatareccss.asp>

students go through in elementary and middle school, so that students are prepared for the rigorous college prep curriculum of high school. This information represents the results and findings from my site visit.

Principal 2 represents the alternative school, where students are sent after failing ninth grade, because it is a less rigorous program and offers a means for students to earn credits quickly. Students are able to transfer to this school once they turn sixteen years old, so the principal does not have a ninth grade, however, the consequences of ninth grade failures are profoundly evident on the campus of AHS. When the mentors and I first asked, “How can a student have their proudest moment and greatest failure in the span of a summer?” the principal, in frustration, replied that there are many reasons and not enough solutions.

Principal 2 states that students are not prepared for high school. Academically, students are unable to do the work in high school. This is evident at AHS by the number of students who struggle to pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), an exam that tests students at a ninth grade level in math and English. It is important to note that statewide five percent of students do not pass the CAHSEE by their senior year. Principal 2’s school offers several classes in CAHSEE preparation for students as well as welcoming the mentors on campus to assist with tutoring. Principal 2 states that more must be done in elementary and middle school to get students academically ready for high school. He suggests looking at placing ninth grade back in the junior high as a possible fix.

Principal 2 also points to the role of the families with keeping students on track. He points out the need for more social services to help families. He provides the

example of a student with high absenteeism due to an ill parent. The student stays home often to take care of his younger siblings. The principal described the student as a smart kid, with no behavioral issues, but just does not attend school regularly. There seems to be no social programs available to assist the family in managing the effects of the ill parent, so the child can attend school regularly. Although these types of problems affect a small number of students, it is a reflection of unusual situations and difficult issues facing schools. Another example is the foster child, who has been moved to multiple homes and has missed significant school during the transition. Although the law says the county must maintain the child in their home school, the student often has to wait weeks at the Receiving Home for the resources to become available to transport them to school.

Principal 3 represents a small charter school in Sacramento Unified School District in Sacramento, California. Principal 3 states that ninth grade failures are somewhat of a problem at his school. He believes the problem is that ninth graders are not ready to do higher-level cognitive tasks required for high school, especially boys. He states that tasks such as organization, managing one's time, and work is difficult for this age group and he credits this partially to an underdeveloped frontal lobe in the brain. By the time the student has developed the mental capacity in tenth grade; they have failed a class and placed themselves in a hole.

To address the issue of ninth grade failures, Principal 3 states that constant meetings with the student and family are vital. This school utilizes Schoology, a computer program that allows parents to see their student's grades and monitor their progress. The issue then becomes getting parents to check-in on their student's

progress and to push their student to success. The school also utilizes mentoring to assist students. Currently upper classmen mentor ninth graders, who appear to respond well to the peer influence.

Another resource that Principal 3's school uses is its small size. The school program maintains small classrooms so that teachers can meet with each student's family in their home setting or other setting outside of school. This allows the teacher to connect with the family as well as assess the home life for any dysfunction that may affect the student's school performance.

Principal 3 identifies a couple of areas that present obstacles to addressing ninth grade failures. First, the lack of resources and support to assist the student to acclimate to high school is an obstacle in supporting ninth graders. The transition from middle school to high school has been identified in the literature as a variable in ninth grade failures and at this school; resources are limited to address this. Lack of parental involvement is identified as an obstacle to addressing ninth grade failures, which was also identified in the literature, plays a crucial factor in a student being successful.

Principal 4 leads a high school within the Davis Joint Unified School District (DJUSD), Davis California. DJUSD operates in a way different from the Sacramento school districts in that they have maintained the Junior High Setting of seventh through ninth grades versus the middle school setting of seventh through eighth grades as is common in Sacramento. This reduces the problem of ninth grade failure significantly. This school is also in a different socioeconomic community than the schools in Sacramento, which also plays into a reduction in the rates of repetitions and drop outs; and a higher graduation rate.

Although ninth grade failures are not an issue within Principal 4's school, he was willing to share his thoughts on what he believes drive the failures. Principal 4 contributes much of the cause on the internal drive of the students to succeed. Students have to want to progress in order to complete their benchmarks and successfully graduate from high school, and that drive has to start early in a child's life. It should be noted that Principal 4 is successful alum of TJHS.

Another cause is unmotivated teachers, or teachers who are not willing to put in the extra work to see a child who may be struggling succeed. According to Principal 4, "A system that does not expect success of their students will have students who do not succeed." Also according to Principal 4, the benefits of working in a school with high failures are very few and school districts are unable to compete for the best talent. In California, teachers have the option of applying to have their student loans excused if they work in a struggling school, but their commitment there is only for a few years. Teachers who work within these difficult school environments often are worn down over time and become ineffectual in their teaching methods.

Interviewing these four principals provided me with a perspective representative of a wide range of high school types. Although the level of significance of the problem varies among the different school, they are all impacted by the problem. I found it interesting and significant that not one of the principals mentioned any solutions coming from the district or state level. They all considered the problem addressable at the school level. These interviews also revealed some variables that are not heavily addressed within the literature such as student motivation and the impact of English learners and special education.

The responses from the interviews with the teachers fell along the same lines as the principal responses. They overwhelmingly agreed that the role of the parents is a significant factor in addressing the issue of ninth grade failures. What the teachers did not mention is the role of teachers' commitment in addressing the issue. Of the ten interviews from the teachers, six came from AHS and four from TJHS, and it was my observation that the AHS teachers appeared more enthused about discussing the issues versus the reserved unenthused responses from the TJHS teachers. Maybe the TJHS teachers were taking their cues from the principal who displayed little enthusiasm or interest in the subject matter. At the time of the interview, the principal was dealing with a Tuberculosis case and preparing for some much-needed HVAC repairs, this may not have been the time to catch him at his best.

In a lively discussion with two AHS teachers, I learned that there is little enthusiasm amongst teachers for the Common Core Standards adopted by the state. Teachers feel many of the problems stem from not teaching children the basics in elementary school; reading, writing and arithmetic; as well as teaching students' manners. The teachers are also frustrated with the lack of art, music, and vocational study programs offered in schools. One teacher stated that there are no incentives or buy-in for students who have no desire to attend college. This impromptu focus group was very forthright on what they consider as the school and the districts poor response to ninth grade failures.

Survey Data Results and Findings

The student survey results consisted of thirty responses from students that ranged from tenth through twelfth grades. Of the respondents, eighteen were female and twelve were male. The results of the surveys paralleled the data from the literature review. Students felt they were unprepared for math and English. Seventy-six percent of students responded to “Do you feel you were prepared in eighth grade for math in ninth grade?” with either disagree or strongly disagree. A slightly smaller amount of 66% responded, “Do you feel you were prepared in eighth grade for math in ninth grade?” with either disagree or strongly disagree. These results are telling as these students promoted from eighth grade with the perception that they had been prepared for high school, yet upon reflection discovered they were in fact not ready for the rigor of ninth grade.

An overwhelming amount, 93%, admitted they skipped a class during the ninth grade, with a majority of those stating they skipped one to five classes a week. Missing class is a significant contributor in failing a course and rising repetition rates. Suspensions are another contributor to missing classes and eventual failure. Twenty percent indicated they had been suspended at least once in the ninth grade. The majority of the students surveyed had never been suspended, which as an observer of the behavioral difficulties displayed at AHS, was rather surprising.

When asked, “What could you have done to have been successful in the ninth grade,” many students responded with simply “worked harder.” One response of “took

school more seriously,” brought to mind the response by the principal that ninth graders are not yet mature enough for high school.

The survey of the parents, reveal the unique perspective of the group that, the school puts a significant amount on blame on for the problem of failures. Parents, when asked, “The school’s communication with me regarding my student’s academic struggles was adequate,” overwhelmingly disagreed. One parent stated her child had missed more than a month of school before she was notified and at that point, it was too late to make up missed work. The parent stated the only option made available by the school was to transfer to AHS to make up the lack of credits. Lack of communication from the school was a repeated concern expressed by parents who often felt they were left in the dark until the situation at school became critical for students. It should be noted that at AHS’s Back to School Night, less than twenty percent of the parents attended, despite telephone calls to each household as a reminder and dinner being served.

Lack of options was also a concern revealed in the survey with the parents. Parents who were actively involved in their student’s education stated when their child began to have struggles there were few options to help the child, especially with struggles in math class. Parents also expressed few options in receiving help to address behavioral problems students may have been having at the school. One parent revealed she learned of several programs that may have helped her student after the student had failed and transferred to the alternative school.

This research has revealed that ninth grade failure is not a single dimensional issue but a multifaceted problem. The factors that contribute to failure in ninth grade

and the solutions to address it will take more than restructuring ninth grade or team teaching. TJHS has already implemented these changes and the results have not lowered the rate of repetitions or drop outs, nor has the graduation rate increased. Restructuring ninth grade and team teaching are not the silver bullet fixes, it will take these programs plus many more to change the tide of ninth grade failures.

Chapter 5 ~ Conclusions and Recommendation

Conclusions

How could a student have his proudest moment and greatest failure in the span of a summer? This research project study began with my asking this question. The issue of ninth grade failures is a multifaceted problem and the solutions are neither simple nor quick to be implemented. The causes of the problems do not fall in the lap of one group (i.e. students) and the solutions are not owned by one group (i.e. schools). The issues affect everyone and it will be take a group effort to resolve this problem. The solutions will include a variety of programs and a revamping of our current curriculum. The role of the parent is significant to a student's success and more must be done to get parents reconnected to the student's education. Last, this paper does not address several themes revealed in the research, such as race, English learners, and special education, which need further more in-depth review.

The research hypothesis for this study is not supported: "restructuring ninth grade will not lead to lower failures at TJHS and lower enrollment at AHS." Restructuring ninth grade alone will not lead to any changes in the problem of ninth grade failures. For the past four years, TJHS has had a restructured intensive program designed for students identified in eighth grade as potential drop out risk. After four years, there has been very little change in the failures the school experiences. AHS continues to receive a significant surge of students from TJHS every quarter. Research for this study and literature reviewed indicate that the leading causes of ninth grade

failures are failing either Math or English courses; distractions from family dysfunction and parents not being involved in the students education; and students not being academically prepared for the increased rigor of high school curriculum.

The recommendations to address the causes and form solutions for ninth grade failures must encompass action from the federal level down to the parents. The federal government must work to ensure that states adopt the class size levels laid out in NCLB. School districts must commit to hiring enough teachers to effectively bring class sizes down to manageable levels. The state must follow through with implementation and enforcement of Common Core Standards. Common Core establishes uniformity in what schools teach and demands school raise the standard of the curriculum so that students at any school and in any state are learning the same material. Federal and state funding needs to be increased to address the gap in programs for English learners and special education. The final recommendation is for schools to engage parents via social media. The more parents are engaged the greater the success a student achieves and one affective ways could be to use social media.

Recommendations

Comment [A1]: Move this section on recommended future study to final section of this chapter.

Recommendation 1:

The State of California Department of Education continues with its plan to implement Common Core Standards. The goal of Common Core Standards is to create a unified curriculum that is standard across schools and states. This will allow students at different schools to learn the same material no matter where the student lives. Math

and English test scores being raised 10% will be the measurement that determines success. This plan is realistic and achievable as it is already adopted by California and is currently being phased into school's curriculum with a final implementation date of June 2015.

Recommendation 2:

The State of California Department of Education implement regulations that class sizes be reduced to the levels established by the NCLB. This will be measured by enrollment of twenty-five students in grades first through third; higher grades maintain enrollment at thirty students. This is achievable as there is new funding authorized by the federal government to support NCLB goals, which school districts can tap into in order to hire more teachers and reduce class sizes. This is a realistic plan because in 2000, school were already moving toward class size reduction, but were forced to redirect funds during the economic recession, this is not a new concept for districts and schools, and can be attained by June 2015.

Recommendation 3:

School districts should utilize social media to better connect and communicate with parents. This will be measured by eighty percent of parents connected to the schools social media portal, such as Facebook or Twitter. This is achievable as most schools are already using social media in some form and most parents are apt to check their social media before they check their email. This is realistic because the use of social media is a dominant factor in many people's lives and because it is readily

available and accessible, makes for easy buy-in. Schools using social media can connect to parents at the time when parents sign emergency cards at the beginning of the school year, in August 2014.

Recommendation 4:

School districts should implement an assessment test for eighth grade students to measure the appropriate work level for the courses the student will be entering in ninth grade; the appropriate academic structure (college bound or vocational study); and the type of school setting (large or small campus environment) the student will be most successful. This assessment test will provide a personalized recommendation for students and allow for better placement of students based on their skills and interest. This assessment is achievable as schools already conduct significant standardized testing. The assessment is realistic because it will help place students in school settings that are better suited toward their success. Developing and implementing this assessment tool can be accomplished by August 2015.

Recommended Future Study

A future study should address the role of race and how to create a canvas of education that provides every student with equal access to quality education in America. African-American and Hispanic students experience ninth grade failure at a disproportionately higher rate of other students and future studies should address solutions. Future studies should also address the fundamental structure of high school. Whether to

maintain ninth grade at the high school level versus the junior high level, must be determined given the psychological stage of the students.

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Comment [A2]: Fix the formatting of your references. See APA Guidelines on reference page formatting.

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Appendices

Appendix I. – Interview Questions

Appendix II. – Survey Questions

Appendix III. – Data Charts

Appendix 1 - Interview Questions

Interview Questions

I am inviting you to participate in a brief interview on failures that occur in the ninth grade, their effect on graduation rates and what can be done to prevent the failures. My name is Alexis Hince and I am completing my master's degree in public administration at Golden Gate University. I am a graduate of TJHS and a mentor at AHS and am very interested in how ninth grade failures are affecting these schools. I would like to get your personal perspectives on this topic.

The interview should take you approximately 20 minutes to complete. Your answers will be kept confidential and anonymous and will be used by me for the purpose of completing my degree. I will not publicly release your responses or other information about you.

I hope that you will participate in this interview because your input is important. Thank you in advance for participating and for helping me complete my research study.

Principal

1. Do you consider ninth grade failures to be an issue at your school?
2. What do you consider to be the three primary reasons for the lack of success of 9th graders?
3. What is your school doing today to promote ninth grade student success?
4. What plans, if any, will you implement at your school to address ninth grade failures?
5. What is your greatest obstacle in addressing ninth grade failures?

Teachers

1. What is the primary subject you teach?
2. What percent of the ninth graders do not pass your class?
3. What do you consider the three primary reasons students do not pass your class?
4. Do you believe ninth grade failures are an issue at your school?
5. What should your school do today to reduce 9th grade student failures?
6. What if anything, prevents your school from solving ninth grade failures?

7. How would you solve the 9th grade student failure problem?

Registrar

1. What percentage of students at your school fails to pass ninth grade?
2. What are three primary reasons for ninth grade student failures?
3. What percentage of ninth grade students not graduate within four years?
4. What is the percentage of students that transfer to AHS?

Appendix 2 - Survey Questions

Student Survey Questions

Question	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1. I was satisfactorily prepared in eighth grade for ninth grade English.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. I skipped class during the ninth grade.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. I was suspended during the ninth grade.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Ninth grade teachers were supportive in my academic success.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. I was satisfactorily prepared in eighth grade for ninth grade math?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Family issues were a distraction for me during the ninth grade.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. I considered dropping out of school in the ninth grade.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. How many classes did you skip each week If you skipped a class (es) in the ninth grade?

a. 0 b. 1-5 c. 6-10 d. more than 11

9. If you were suspended, how many times were you suspended in ninth grade? _____

10. What could teachers have done to support your success in ninth grade?

11. What type of family issues did you experience in the ninth grade?

12. What could your parents/family have done to support your success in ninth grade?

13. What could you have done to have been successful in the ninth grade?

Parent Survey Questions

Question	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1. My student was satisfactorily prepared in eighth grade for ninth grade English.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. My student was satisfactorily prepared in eighth grade for ninth grade math.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Ninth grade teachers were supportive in my student's academic.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. The school's communication with me regarding my student's academic struggles was adequate.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

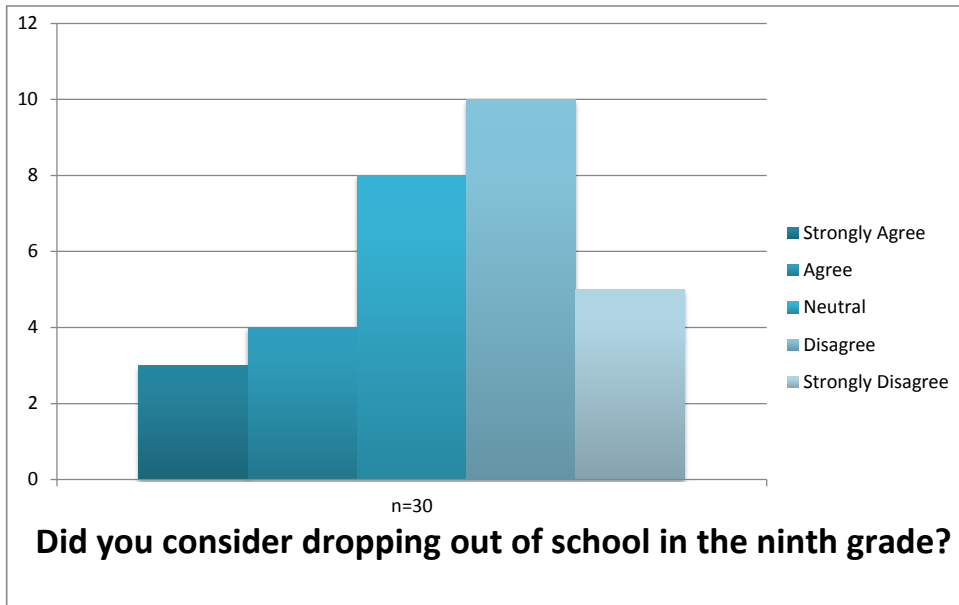
5. What do you feel contributes to your student's troubles in ninth grade?

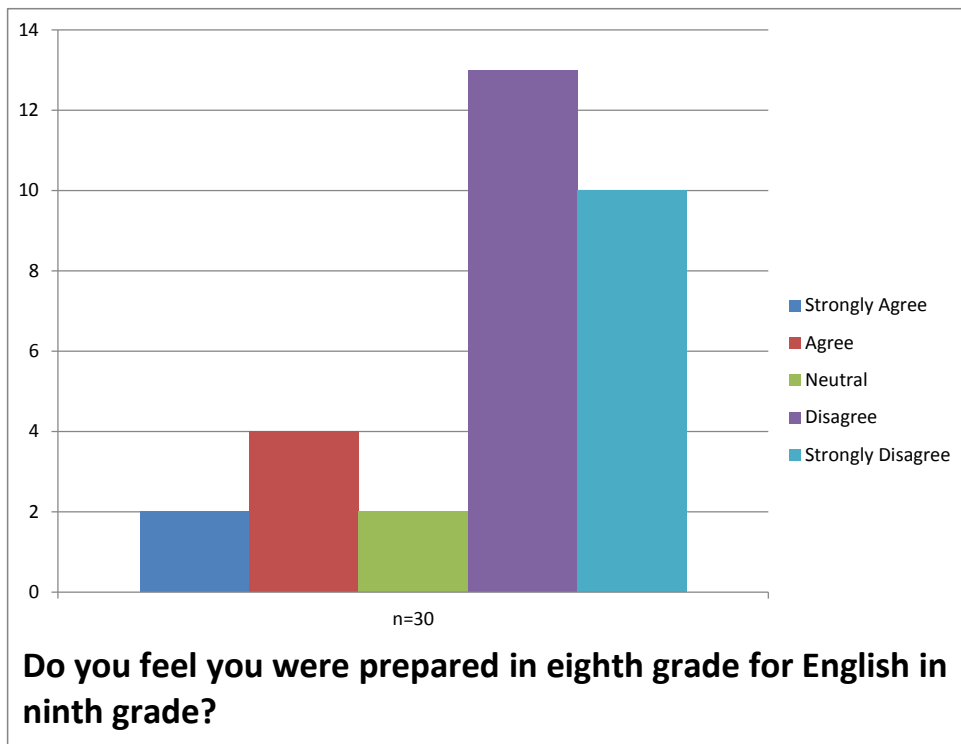
6. What do you feel the school and/or teachers could have to help your student be more successful in ninth grade?

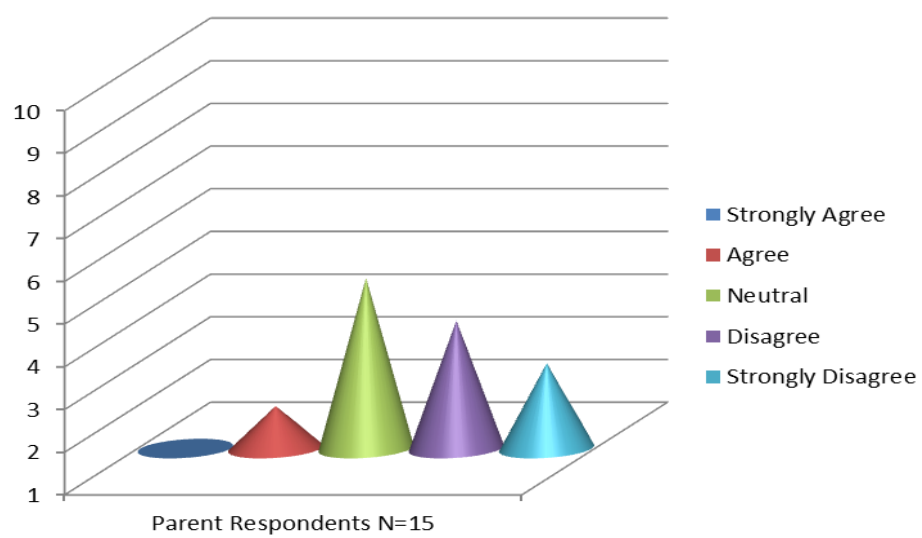
7. What do you think you could have done to help your student be more successful in ninth grade?

8. What could your student had done to be successful in ninth grade?

Appendix 3 – Data Charts







The school's communication with me regarding my student's academic struggles was adequate.

