

Academic Success and Community Connection during the High School Transition: Effect of a  
Group-based Intervention for Ninth Grade Boys Entering a New School District

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Abstract

Research shows that there is a significant need for student support during the transition to high school. There is an increased risk of academic decline during the high school transition when supportive relationships are essential and when such relationships are at a time of transition and experience instability. The current study examined the efficacy of a peer group intervention for freshman students transferring to a new school district on variables of academic success, attendance and feelings of community connection. Seven freshman male students participated in an eight week group intervention focused on school success and social connections. Results showed no significant change in academic success, attendance behavior or feelings of community connection across the intervention. Conclusions and implications for future research is discussed further.

Academic Success and Community Connection During the High School Transition: Effect of a Group-based Intervention for Ninth Grade Boys Entering a New School District

For most students the transition to high school presents many unique challenges. A student's transition into high school can bring with it academic and social struggles (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Langenkamp, 2010). In fact it has been shown that some decline in achievement during the high school transition is a normal occurrence for students (Choi, 2012; Smith, 2006). Studies show that students transitioning to high school experience a drop in grade point average (GPA) and experience attendance issues (Barber & Olsen, 2004, Choi, 2012). As students move to the high school environment they must adjust to different surroundings and a different culture. This transition often involves acclimating to a larger community where supports from peers and teachers are less individualized than in middle school (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Choi, 2012; Langenkamp, 2010). Having less individualized supportive relationships with teachers and peers during the high school transition can be a risk factor for students who struggle academically (Langenkamp, 2010). The transition to high school also co-occurs with other life changes. For example, parents often allow their children more autonomy during this time. Students thus rely more on their social groups and school community for support which may or may not offer the appropriate supports for particular students (Neild, 2009; Weinstein, Mermelstein, Hedeker, Hankin & Flay, 2006). Even when students have support from their peers, the effect of recalibrating friendships and peer supports during the high school transition can relate to academic decline if only on a short term basis (Smith, 2006). High school transition can also bring on positive changes. Students who may have experienced difficulty in elementary or middle school may thrive due to new opportunities and a new beginning (Neild, 2009; Smith, 2006). Students may also discover fuller and more enriching social connections in the new high

school setting (Neild, 2009). This being said, there can be a lot riding on how successful or unsuccessful this transition is for students.

Freshman students with failing grades after their first year are more likely to drop out later in high school (Langenkamp, 2010; Neild, 2009; Smith, 2006). It is reported that about one third of the students who drop out of high school in the United States encountered struggles as freshman as they did not progress on to tenth grade (Neild, 2009). Freshman students who experience academic declines during their freshman year of high school are also more likely to drop out of college during their first year (Smith, 2006). For those students who successfully navigate the academic, social and personal transitions embedded in the transition to high school, there is a higher probability of graduating within four years (Neild, 2009). The following sections will address various factors which influence student success during the first transition year to high school

### *Peer Connection*

Social support plays an important role in adolescent risk and protective factors (Weinstein et al., 2006). Having strong social connections and support can protect students against mental and emotional stressors while lacking social supports can leave adolescents at risk for developing mental and emotional distress. The addition of stable relationships during the middle school to high school transition can aid in the adjustment to a new school environment and help support academic success. Research has found that strong relationships with peers and teachers can help student academic achievement (Langenkamp, 2010). Weinstein et al. (2006) found that peer interaction positively affected student mood for students in the ninth grade compared to students in tenth grade.

While research has shown that peer connection can be a protective factor for students entering high school, it is also true that students encounter stress due to changes in previously established relationships and the forming new friendships in the new school environment (Smith, 2006). Barber and Olsen (2004) identified that students who transition into high school experience challenges in navigating the unfamiliar social landscape of their new school. The transition to high school and the relative instability of peer relationships co-occurs with the time that peer relationships are of utmost importance for a typical adolescent (Langenkamp, 2010). This transition can be distracting and result in reduced academic success (Smith, 2006). A student's perceptions and attitudes about school and academic effort can also be significantly influenced by relationships with friends and other peers (Crosnoe, Riegle-Crumb, Field, Frank & Muller, 2008). This is important because student attitudes about their academic ability and motivation greatly influence school success (Choi, 2012; Yeung, 2011). While peer-to-peer relationships play a major role in the lives of new high school students, students create relationships and connections with many more people within the school. The greater school community also plays an integral part in supporting students through the high school transition.

### *Community Connection*

Community connection refers to mutual support amongst a group of people in which individuals feel a sense of belonging (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). A student's connection to the school community can be defined in various ways including support from teachers, support from peers, and being involved in school-based activities (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming & Hawkins, 2004; Maurizi, Ceballo, Epstein-Ngo & Cortina, 2013). Studies have shown that students with a strong sense of belonging to their school tend to achieve greater success academically (Maurizi et al., 2013). Transitioning to high school though can damage some of

these important connections. The transition to high school is accompanied by a fracture of connections to middle school teachers and some middle school peers. Only about 60 percent of a high school freshman's eighth grade class are also a part of their ninth grade class in part due to school zoning rules where students are assigned to a high school in a district based on their home address and proximity to the various high schools in the district (Neild, 2009).

High schools are also usually larger and have more students than middle schools. Studies show that students transitioning to high school feel less school-based support (Barber & Olsen, 2004; De Wit, Karioja, Rye & Shain, 2011). Barber and Olsen (2004) found that students transitioning from eighth grade to ninth grade felt less support from teachers and a reduced connection to the school environment when compared to the smaller environment of their middle school. The diminished support felt by students transitioning to high school connected to higher rates of depression and social anxiety in students (De Wit et al., 2011). This can add to the many challenges students face during the transition year. Often students experience declines in academic achievement or lose interest in school (Choi, 2012).

The larger and less individualized environment that high school offers is often most detrimental to students already at risk. For at risk students, the connection and belonging to community is a significant factor with regards to their academic success and emotional well-being (Maurizi et al., 2013). Students who struggle academically are often overlooked by the school community including by teachers and staff. This may be due to a lack of hope for a student's future potential (Langenkamp, 2010). The teachers of the school community greatly impact a student's connection to the school including being able to influence peer-to-peer interactions.

By creating relationships with their students and providing an educationally productive environment, teachers can also influence peer group relationships and encourage academic success. At the same time, without effective classroom management techniques, teachers can contribute to the creation of peer groups that hinder rather than foster academic achievement by producing disruptive classroom settings un conducive to student engagement in learning (Hamm, Farmer, Lambert & Gravelle, 2014). All freshman students are new to any high school they attend but as stated previously, some of the social connections that students rely on for support remain intact from middle school to high school. The transition experience is unique for those students navigating the high school transition who come from a completely different district.

### *Transferring Students*

Strong relationships with peers and teachers are especially important when there is a change in school community (Langenkamp, 2010). Students changing districts can lose their peer relationships and their connection to their school community. Often within a district, students are supported by the integrated teaming of teachers and administrators from each level of schooling to build a district wide scaffold of curriculum in which students benefit from consistent and linear instruction. Students moving districts are removed from that supportive structure and enter a district that does not have experience in the child's educational history. This can affect the quality of the student's education and bond with their teachers in high school (Langenkamp, 2010). Kirshner, Gaertner & Pozzoboni (2010) examined the effects of students being displaced and transferring schools on student academic achievement and long term school outcomes. They found that state test scores were significantly lower for those students new to a school than for those students who were previously established in the school district. Transferred students also showed significantly higher rates of dropout and failure to graduate



than other students. Despite these challenges, there are interventions and techniques that have proved to be helpful in easing student transition to high school. The following section will examine interventions that focus on building peer and community supports.

### *Interventions*

Freshman students benefit most from a specific and personalized community they built for ninth graders. Research has found that schools with an established transition program for incoming freshman that included engaging teachers and staff had students transition to the school more smoothly and students dropped out at lower rates than schools without a transition program (Smith, 2006). Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2013) examined the lasting impact of a freshman transition program focused on creating a 9<sup>th</sup> grade community centered on supportive and caring peer-to-peer and peer-to-teacher relationships. Through student responses during senior year, results showed that the community support built during the freshman year transition program helped to ease the transition to high school and continued to positively impact students' high school experience through all four years. In a similar intervention, Hamm et al. (2014) examined the *Supporting Early Adolescents' Learning and Social Success* (SEALS) intervention, a school-based intervention which trains teachers to use instructional techniques which utilize peer interactions that promote engagement in the educational content. The SEALS training shows teachers how classroom social dynamics can contribute to or distract from desired academic outcomes. Results show that the SEALS intervention was effective at supporting student academic success. This is to suggest that peer context plays a significant role in students' academic achievement and that the greater school community, including teachers, can interact and influence those social contexts.

As stated previously, school transitions can be difficult times for students who may experience emotional distress. In such times it is important that students know they have support from the school community to work through such distress. Research conducted by Choi (2012) examined the effect of the Protective Behaviors (PB) program on student academic achievement and attendance. The PB program focuses on encouraging people to speak out when they feel they are in a distressful situation. Results showed that while attendance remained an issue for students, attendance was significantly better for those students in the PB program as compared to students not participating in the program.

The challenges faced by incoming freshman students is well documented. At a developmental stage when interpersonal relationships are most critical, important connections for transitioning students are breaking and being reshaped. It is an even more trying time for students transferring to a new school and trying to establish all new relationships in a totally new school and community. As schools utilize testing and academic achievement as markers for success, it has never been more important that students feel engaged and connected to their learning. Interventions exist that focus on building supports within the community. Research is still lacking regarding interventions that specifically target the building of peer relationships. The purpose of the present study is to examine peer group based intervention for newly enrolled students. The research hypothesis states that a peer group intervention will significantly improve student academic achievement, school attendance and feelings of connection to and support from the school community.

### Method

This study examined the student transition to high school. Specifically, it focused on ninth grade students transferring to a new school district. A peer group intervention was used to

support students' academic and social growth during their transition to high school. Research outcomes were based on student GPA, attendance (based on tardiness and unexcused absences) and participant self-reports of their feelings of connection to the school community.

### *Rationale*

A peer group intervention was used for this study due to the fact that while previous research has examined the effect of various transition programs for incoming freshman, few if any focused on specific peer-to-peer support programs. Since the target population of this study included students new to the district who may initially lack strong connections within the school community, a peer group intervention which focused on specific peer connections and support was appropriate. In order to determine the effect of such a group on student academic achievement and connection to the school, a pre and post test design was used. Since the population of newly transferring freshman students can be minimal in a school, this research method allowed for one set of participants to be used as a control and experimental group. This study examined how the formation of a study/social group for this population of students impacts school investment (attendance), academic success (grades), and participant feelings of community connection.

### *Participants*

The student sample for this research consisted of eight male freshman new to the school district. This study utilized a convenience sample to select participants. Students were first identified by their counselors as a newly enrolled freshman male who might benefit from an academically supportive peer group. Next, those identified students were interviewed by the project manager and group facilitator. Students were given information about the group, the possible benefits and risks of joining the group, and asked about their interest in joining the

group. In this time, student gave their verbal assent to join if they so desired and were given a consent form to be completed by their parent. The project manager then called the parents of the student to give a similar explanation of the project and what the consent form entailed. The student group met for 8 weeks in the morning or during the school day in one of three locations on campus: the library conference room, the gym or the community room.

### *Procedures*

The group met every Tuesday before or during school over 8 weeks starting January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014 and ending March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014. The group also met once after the Tuesday morning meetings for a wrap up session with breakfast. In all, the group met nine times. Each session lasted 30 minutes. Sessions consisted of an initial check in with group members and then a group discussion and sharing on topics of long term goal setting, short term goal setting, school goals, action plans, identifying strengths and successes, and identifying barriers and struggles. Every third week was devoted to a basketball session in the gym where group members were able to engage in a physically stimulating activity before classes begin.

### *Data Analysis*

This study examined data from three domains of the student freshman experience. Data on academic achievement, attendance patterns, and connection to the school community were collected. Participant GPA records, tardiness and unexcused absences, and participant responses on a community connection survey were used for data analysis. The academic year is based on a semester schedule and the group intervention for this study took place during the beginning of the second semester. Therefore, pre and post-intervention data reflect the first 12 weeks of the first semester and second semester respectfully. The research hypothesis stated that student cumulative GPA would increase, total incidences of tardiness and unexcused absences would

decrease, and participant feelings of community connection would increase between pre-intervention and post-intervention. GPA and attendance data was obtained using Synergy, a school wide educational records data software. Participant responses to feelings of community connection were obtained using a 6 item survey (Appendix B). Each question on the survey was based on a likert scale from 1 (low community connection) to 5 (high community connection). A dependent samples t-test was utilized to determine the outcome and statistical significance of the research results. There were originally 8 participants in the study however 1 student transferred schools during the study so the final number of participants came to 7 total (n=7).

### Results

The research hypothesis was that students participating in the peer group would experience a significantly higher GPA through the first 12 weeks semester two (during and after the group intervention) when compared to the first 12 weeks of semester one (before group intervention). Likewise, it was hypothesized that participants would experience fewer combined tardies and unexcused absences through the first 12 weeks of semester two when compared to the first 12 weeks of semester one. Statistical analysis using a dependent samples t-test showed no significant change in participant GPA,  $t(6) = 1.732$ , or attendance record,  $t(6) = 0.818$ , between pre and post intervention. The research hypothesis was not supported.

Another research hypothesis was that student participants in the group intervention, via the community connection survey, would report increased feelings of community connection after the intervention when compared to student reports of community connection before the intervention. Statistical analysis using a dependent samples t-test showed no significant change in feelings of community connection when comparing participant pre and post intervention survey responses,  $t(6) = 1.257$ . The research hypothesis was not supported.

## Discussion

No significant results were found in any of the three research hypotheses of this study. Participant GPA did not significantly rise from pre-intervention to post-intervention. Similarly, tardiness and unexcused absences in total did not significantly decrease across the intervention. Participant feelings of connection to the school community also did not significantly rise after the group intervention when compared to pre-intervention levels. This could be a result of various uncontrolled variables and factors present within the study. First, participant attendance throughout the intervention was inconsistent at times. It is most likely due to the group meeting time. With the group meeting before school, it was a struggle to maintain consistent participant attendance. About midway through the sessions, an adjustment was made to meet for a shortened amount of time during the school day rather than before school in order to make it easier for participants to join the group. This greatly improved attendance and would be the standard procedure for future iterations of similar groups. Adding an extra incentive for attendance may also help to improve attendance outcomes for the group and may make before school meeting times possible.

This study and the group intervention focused on peer-to-peer support and aimed to investigate how peer support influenced various domains of the freshman experience. With GPA, attendance and feelings of community support as dependent variables, it could be that when it comes to peer support these are not appropriate variables to investigate. There may be other factors that are impacted more by peer support. Additionally, since this group of participants were introduced and together for a mere eight weeks and attendance was inconsistent, it may not have been a sufficient amount of time to create meaningful connections.

For future research, it may be productive to continue to follow and collect data for the entirety of a student's high school experiences to see how the group peer connections either sustain or fall away over time and how they affect the high school experience.

Although no significant results were found regarding student academic achievement, school investment and attendance or connection to the school community, the results did show positive changes in all areas which may indicate some benefit to those students who did participate. Even though group attendance was inconsistent, there was consistent contact with the lead researcher through the duration of the study which may have impacted students' feelings of connection to supportive adults of the school community rather than connection to peers. This may help to explain the results of the survey results as many of the questions related to student comfort in turning to peers for support rather than school faculty. As previous research has found, engaged and supportive freshman teachers help students transition to high school through the supportive relationships they build.

While the current study did not yield significant results regarding the use of a peer-to-peer group intervention to support academic success and school community connection for freshman students new to a school district, there is compelling evidence that supports having an established program for helping students transition to high school. Most likely, a combination of peer and staff support is most beneficial to support student adjustment to high school.

Appendix A

**Parent Consent Form – Student Small Group Research Project**

Your student has been invited to participate in a research study conducted by Michael James Lambert from Portland State University, Counselor Education Department. The researcher hopes to learn how an academically and socially supportive small group helps new students succeed in school and connect with the school community. This project is being conducted in conjunction with the master’s degree requirements for the school counselor education program at Portland State University. Oversight of this project is provided by Lisa Aasheim (school counselor education program director, Portland State University) and Lorrie McKedy (Centennial high school counselor). As a newly enrolled freshman male in the Centennial school district, your student was selected as a possible participant in this study.

In this small group, students will meet on Tuesday mornings from 7:00 to 7:30 for 10 weeks starting on January 7<sup>th</sup> and lasting until March 18<sup>th</sup> (January 21<sup>st</sup> will be excluded due to finals). The half hour group time will be used to discuss goal setting, long term and short term goals, planning for success, self-awareness, and overcoming obstacles. There will be breakfast offered at each group meeting. Since students will be working and sharing within a group, we cannot ensure the confidentiality of what is shared in the group. While this is true, each student in the group will be strongly encouraged to keep group work confidential and each student will be informed that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Students will understand that joining and withdrawing from the group is voluntary. While sharing will be encouraged, group members will understand that they will not be forced to share more than they are comfortable with. Students will also be able to talk to their counselor to address any issues that may arise within the group. In addition to contributing to research that may help other students in the future, your student may also benefit from this group through an increase in engagement in their academic success and the school community.

The researcher will be utilizing data on class grades and attendance as well as administering a survey on school connection before and after the group is complete. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be linked to you or identify you will be kept confidential. In order to ensure confidentiality, no names of students will be linked to the data obtained. The completed surveys will be kept confidential by not being associated with students’ names and being kept in a locked file cabinet in a secured office in the counseling center.

Your student’s participation is voluntary. They do not have to take part in this study, and it will not affect their relationship with Centennial high school teachers or staff. Your student may also withdraw from this study at any time without affecting their relationships with Centennial teachers and staff.

If you have questions or concerns about your student’s participation in this study, please contact **Michael Lambert** ([mjl4@pdx.edu](mailto:mjl4@pdx.edu), 503-762-6146) or **Lorrie McKedy** ([Lorrie\\_McKedy@centennial.k12.or.us](mailto:Lorrie_McKedy@centennial.k12.or.us), 503-762-6146). Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the above information and agree to allow your student to take part in this study. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this form for your own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print name





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