

Improving High School Transition with CAT Camp

Jill Geltner
 Valdosta State University
 Brian Law
 Valdosta High School
 Amanda Forehand
 Howard High School
 Dinah Amber Miles
 Howard High School

Author Note

Please address all correspondence regarding this article to Dr. Jill Geltner at jageltner@valdosta.edu.

Abstract

Transition to a new school for adolescent students can be challenging. Students who have difficulty navigating the transition to ninth grade are at an increased disadvantage academically and personally. Even students who approach the move with excitement often have unrealistic expectations of what is necessary for success. Overall, those who do well freshmen year are more likely to graduate from high school and contribute positively to their communities. This article outlines a program designed to promote high school transition success through a summer day camp program called CAT Camp named for the school mascot, the Wildcat. Students who attended CAT Camp demonstrated more success in their first year in high school with higher GPAs, better attendance, less course failures, and fewer discipline referrals when compared to those who did not attend the summer program. Implications for practice are included.

Keywords: high school transition; school counselors and transition; school counseling and transition

The transition to high school can be quite challenging for many students (Akos, 2004; Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005). Not only do ninth-graders need to fit into a new school culture, they must understand the credit system for courses, graduation requirements, different student groupings, and changing relationships with teachers. Students who have

difficulty navigating the transition to ninth grade are at an increased disadvantage academically and personally, showing increased depressive symptoms and a decline in grades (Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Connor, & Spas, 2007). Furthermore, "researchers target ninth grade as the make or break year for completing high school" (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010, p. 447). Students given specific assistance with the transition seem more likely to find the process less daunting. A summer camp transition program for incoming ninth-graders described in this article helped one southeastern high school improve the students' educational performance gap while raising the school's overall promotion and graduation. In addition, students who participated in the program had fewer discipline referrals and better attendance than those who did not participate.

The National Center for Education Statistics estimates approximately 500,000 high school students per year leave school before graduation (Seastrom, Hoffman, Chapman, & Stillwell, 2005). There is a correlation between high school dropout rate and ninth grade failure (Neild, 2009). When examining ninth-graders specifically, 22% of students repeat ninth grade and only 10-15% of those repeaters ever graduate (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Forty percent of ninth-graders struggle with the transition to high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Neild (2009) suggested, students who fall off track during freshman year have very low odds of earning a high school diploma (p. 55). Because ninth grade has the highest enrollment rate in high schools, intervention at this point is crucial to avoid potential school failure.

Student Perceptions

The research on transitions suggests, students approach normative school transitions with both concern and excitement (Akos & Galassi, 2004, p. 213). There is an optimistic anticipation of the next step into high school but unrealistic expectations of skills necessary for student success often characterize the transition, too. Research investigating student transition needs indicate that students want information about academics, procedures and the social structure (Akos & Galassi, 2004). The level and difficulty of high school courses shape academic concerns. Procedural concerns are associated with how to navigate a larger building as well as general procedures in a more complex environment; how to navigate a crowded hallway

and get to class on time, for example (Cushman, 2006). High school students are also aware of the larger impact high school success or failure can have long-term. This may add an additional level of anxiety to a stressful situation. In several studies surveying freshman before and after the transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Butts & Cruzeiro, 2005; Letrello & Miles, 2003), students requested information from older peers, students already successful in the high school to help ease the transition. Incoming ninth-graders also hoped for meaningful connections with teachers whom they can go to for assistance (Cushman, 2006). Students want a bridge to success in high school (Neild, 2009). Providing transition activities has proved to decrease anxiety for students as they move on to high school.

A High School Counselor's Role in Transition

School counselors, who focus on comprehensive school counseling programs, including individual planning, can assist in the high school transition process (Akos, 2004; Cooper & Liou, 2007). The American School Counselor Association National Model (2005) outlines specific actions a school counselor may take to support students in transition (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007). Through the school guidance curriculum and individual student planning, school counselors can anticipate and address a variety of issues with ninth grade students. In each community, the transition response should address changes for those specific students. However, it can be difficult to identify what might work in each community. Regrettably, traditional approaches such as parent night or open house cannot address all transition issues. It would also be impossible for the school counselor to address all these issues in the classrooms in the first few days of school. Attention to these issues prior to the beginning of the school year could put students at ease before they even step into school for their ninth grade year.

School systems have attempted to address and ease ninth grade transition with many creative approaches. Further, schools have used parent-only tours, transition teams, first day of school barbecues, and shadowing programs pairing high school students with incoming freshmen (Hertzog & Morgan, 1997; Lindsay, 1998). For example, some approaches included incoming students making field trips to the high school and one school included teachers in the transition process by creating Teacher Swap-a-Day. High

school teachers teach an eighth grade class for one day. Another plan scheduled several meetings with ninth grade students and advisors during the first few days of school (Hertzog & Morgan, 1997). Cushman (2006) mentioned the need for providing a bridge experience during the summer for incoming freshmen, but without specific recommendations. Neild (2009) also mentioned that many school districts offer summer bridge programs or one-day orientation programs but with no specific approach proven effective or recommended.

Students who perform well academically in the freshman year seem more likely to graduate from high school. With full credits for the ninth grade year, students graduate in four years, as expected by the district. Taking steps to create a more successful transition to ninth grade enhances the chances of academic success. Anticipatory steps set the stage for success prior to the beginning of the school year (Dimmitt & Carey, 2007; Turner, 2007). After eighth grade graduation, but before these students enter the high school building, one school counselor (second author) bridged the gap with CAT Camp. This transition program offered a responsive service to address the needs of the transition needs of students in one southeastern Georgia school district.

CAT Camp

A school counselor and administrator created the CAT Camp (named for the school mascot, the Wildcat) to address local ninth grade transition needs. Knowing students in this particular community could use stimulation in the summer months and needed to become familiar with the school, CAT Camp was a practical option. Additionally, because students who remain in school programs during summer breaks tend to do better academically (Borman, Rachuba, Hewes, Bouley, & Kaplan, 2001) and preparation of at-risk students can help them adjust better to new schools (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996), this school district hoped this new summer program would bring the participating students and the school success.

CAT Camp program is a collaborative effort aimed at addressing all three areas outlined in the ASCA National Model (2005): academic, career and personal/social domains. School counselor and teachers deliver developmental guidance information in small and large groups.

Given that data indicate Georgia has significant problems with retention of ninth graders and in this community in particular, all incoming ninth grade students are invited to attend a week-long camp at the high school in their assigned Freshman Academy from 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. The goals for the ninth grade counseling program were twofold. First, the program facilitates adjustment and transition issues for attendees. Second, the program created a sense of belonging and outlined expectations for success in all three areas: academic, personal/social, and career. The focus of these activities sought to meet students' immediate needs and concerns (ASCA, 2005, p. 42), a responsive service which has developed into a regular element of the school counseling program. This program is included in the overall school improvement plan with its aim to increase the graduation rate of the high school. The camp supported school goals, which in turn brought staunch support from the school administration for CAT Camp.

There were three main feeder schools for this particular high school and the Freshman Academy welcomes nearly 600 students each fall. Housed in a low income, high minority community, this urban school system has more than 7,000 students enrolled from pre- kindergarten through twelfth grade. All incoming ninth-graders received an invitation to CAT Camp in the spring of eighth grade. Students could choose a participation date from several possible weeks throughout the summer and counselors place students on a first-come, first-serve basis. Since the inception of the program, every student expressing interest in the camp received placement.

Throughout the week, incoming freshman were exposed to fundamental information for high school academic success while also interacting with future classmates and enjoying fun orientation activities. The program addresses nearly all standards from the ASCA National Model (2005) throughout the week. Counselors encouraged student participation with instruction in practical academic skills, engagement in computer-assisted career exploratory activities, and learning about goal-setting and interpersonal skills that will facilitate success in high school. The week begins with icebreakers, a tour of the high school and team building tasks. Included within each day are preplanned lessons created by the school counselor to address high school transition issues such as: *High School Vocabulary*

and *High School: So, What's the Difference?* As the week progresses, students are exposed to more specific lessons about high school such as: *Graduation Requirements and Understanding Classes, Understanding Your Academic Record: GPA, Class Rank and Transcripts, If Success is Meant 2 B, It is Up 2 Me*, and *How to Study at the Secondary Level: Time Management, Study Skills, Organizational Techniques*. These lessons orient students to this particular school system. Moreover, the lessons provide ways to address issues that had caused students concern, difficulty, or confusion in prior transitions. Other activities throughout the week include meeting the principal, online career-related assessments, a scavenger hunt to further familiarize students with the building layout, and designing the class t-shirt. Team building activities continue throughout the week as students become more familiar with the social and academic aspects of high school. One of the primary goals of the program seeks to help students know and feel kinship with the school. On the final day, the program invites parents to a closing celebration where participants recap key program topics and program staff present students with a certificate of attendance.

Data Collection and Results

CAT Camp had short-term and long-goals. Program staff collected data during the week of camp to measure immediate knowledge, and, then measured students' academic performance and progress throughout the ninth grade year. On the first day of CAT Camp, staff administered students a 24-item pretest measure, the *Freshman Knowledge Quiz*. The test items use true/false and multiple-choice items that measured knowledge about the school. Questions included simple informational items such as the number of credits needed to graduate to how often one could take physical fitness. The school counselor created this quiz and students took the quiz again on the final day of camp as a posttest measure. Over the three years of camp offerings, each student, on average, students scored 95% on a post-camp measure. This suggested that the vast majority of ninth graders understood the curriculum taught during these summer camp experiences.

As part of the posttest, students commented on their experiences at CAT Camp. Students have reported feeling connected to the school, the staff, and other students by the end of CAT Camp and overall found it to be an informative and enjoyable experience. One student wrote, One of my biggest fears was just not knowing what to expect or what

to do on my first day. It is still a fear because camp is different from a normal school day but the fear has gone down. I feel like I know somewhat what the first day will be like and what I should do. I know the school better now. I definitely learned more than just one thing! I learned where some classrooms are and how to get there. I learned some high school vocab like credits and different names for classes. I have enjoyed getting to meet some new people. So, overall I've learned a lot." This comment and the following are representative of what campers wrote on the posttest measure qualitative comments." This camp has allowed me to learn my way around the school, which is a big task. I have also enjoyed meeting new friends from other schools that will be with me during my freshman year. Getting to know the CAT Camp counselor and my school counselor really let me know that if I have a question when school starts that someone will help me. I am not afraid of high school anymore. I can't wait to be a freshman!" As is evident, students reported an increased sense of comfort with the transition mirroring what are recommend topics to address in transition program planning (Akos & Galassi, 2004).

After school began, the school counselor tracked freshmen who participated in the summer camp program to examine the impact of the program. School records log data on student GPA, promotion rate, attendance, and discipline referrals. Table 1 summarizes this information by year. Of the students who participated in the camp over three years, 97% passed the ninth grade while more than 25% percent of the general ninth grade student population of this school did not. Students that attended CAT Camp had a 94% attendance rate while the school population had an attendance rate of less than 80%. The average freshman GPA of students who attended CAT Camp was 84.7%, far exceeding the overall school average. (The school reports student grade point averages as percentiles rather than on a 4.0 scale.)

Table 1

CAT Camp variables by year

Variable	Year 1 n=57	Year 2 n=66	Year 3 n=69
GPA	85.2%	83.4%	85.4%
Promotion rate	100%	100%	93%
Attendance	93	94	96
No discipline referrals	90%	90%	86%

Overall, students who participated in CAT Camp had a higher promotion rate, fewer course failures, fewer discipline referrals, better attendance, and a higher GPA as compared to students in the ninth grade who did not attend the orientation camp. From the first year of CAT Camp to the third, the retention rate for all ninth graders decreased from 29.3 to 19.0. Although roughly eleven percent of incoming ninth graders chose to attend CAT Camp, it had a significant impact on the ninth grade promotion rate as a whole. The CAT Camp student groups overwhelmingly found success in ninth grade at this high school.

Implications for School Counselors

School counselors have the unique opportunity to offer students support for the transition from middle to high school. Although the traditional open house and school tour can be helpful for students, going a step further can assist students in new ways to alleviate anxiety and uncertainty about high school. The transition plan for this school included the CAT Camp program, a school based orientation night for eighth grade parents (conducted in February) and a freshman orientation night (done in April). The winter and spring orientation meetings were ideal opportunities to invite students to participate in CAT Camp.

Any school in the country can create a summer experience to support and orient new students. School counselors and other school staff and personnel should advocate for a transition plan for students, such as CAT Camp (Akos, 2004). Each community can tailor the program to suit the needs of that school and neighborhood. A beginning step is to survey current ninth grade students and parents, teachers and staff, to determine the information needed in an orientation program. Those who have been in the school system for several years and have an understanding of the community are most likely to know what information might be helpful for incoming ninth graders. There is no specific list for every school. On the contrary, school information differs from place to place, which is what makes this orientation so important and informative for new students. Helping students understand how rules differ from the middle school to the high school also facilitates smooth transitions. This approach can simplify the process for parents and students putting guidelines in simple and understandable terms.

Additionally, students should visit the school on several occasions, perhaps over a week similar to CAT Camp, and have repeated opportunities to familiarize themselves with the building and classrooms. Students reported an increased sense of comfort simply from knowing their way around the physical space of a larger building (Cushman, 2006). These tours provide the opportunity for school counselors to use high school peer mentors capitalizing on freshmen interest in peers to provide information about high school (Akos, 2004).

Limitations

Certain limitations exist regarding generalization of this freshman orientation program. This specific school funds the program through a grant designed to support small learning communities. The money from this grant pays for camp necessities such as personnel, supplies, class t-shirts, and writing tools. Unfortunately, this grant does cover not transportation costs. Therefore, students with reliable transportation seem most likely to attend CAT Camp. In addition, students or parents must take the initiative to sign up for the camp and be willing to attend. The camp does have significantly fewer students who attend as compared to the incoming number of freshman. Although each incoming freshman is invited, only about 11% attend. Certainly, some students cannot attend without transportation provided. These systemic barriers certainly may make the option of attending CAT Camp for some impossible. A possible solution may be to invite students to participate in non-school settings such as local churches or community centers that families can readily access. Reducing systemic barriers such as lack of transportation and unfamiliar school environments can help families fully consider the program and its benefits. Developing community support for the program may increase participation.

Additionally, students who have significant family responsibilities or those who have informal jobs may not be able to attend CAT Camp. Moreover, students with physical challenges who need medical support cannot attend the program because the aides and nurses may be on break. The students who chose to attend CAT Camp may be different from those who did not attend in terms of access to transportation, physical ability, and family responsibilities. Researchers did not collect demographic

data so gains made in subgroups based on gender, racial, and socioeconomic variables remain unknown for this data set. However, although researchers did not collect participants' demographic information, the participants seem generally representative of the diverse school population.

Conclusion

Georgia leads the nation with the highest dropout rate of 22.1% (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009). Furthermore, inner city and at-risk students have an increased opportunity for success in adapting to high school if their high schools provide structured opportunities that demystify the high school experience (Turner, 2007). CAT Camp is a responsive service designed to help students with high school transition through intensive orientation to school environment, culture, and expectations. During CAT Camp, students built relationships with caring adults and peers, explored career pathways, and received orientation to challenges of high school studies and peer groups.

As part of the leadership and advocacy role, school counselors are in an ideal position to support and influence high school transition programming with programs like CAT Camp. Whether directly, or through a collaboration or consultation role, school counselors can plan activities before students enter high school to promote student success in academic, personal/social and career realms. As each community has different needs, school counselors can proactively support success for new high school students.

References

- Akos, P. (2004). Transition programming for professional school counselors. In B.T. Erford (Ed.), *Professional school counseling: A handbook of theories, programs, & practices*. (pp. 881-888). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Akos, P., & Galassi, J. P. (2004). Middle and high school transitions as viewed by students, parents and teachers. *Professional School Counseling, 7*, 212-221. American School Counselor Association. (2005). *The ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Borman, G., Rachuba, L., Hewes, G., Boulay, M., & Kaplan, J. (2001). Can a summer intervention program using trained volunteer teachers narrow the achievement gap? First year results of a multi-year study. *ERS Spectrum 19*(2), 19-30.
- Butts, M. J., & Cruzeiro, P. A. (2005). Student perceptions of factors leading to an effective transition from eighth to ninth grade. *American Secondary Education, 34*, 70-80. Center for Labor Market Studies (2009). *Left behind in America: The nation's dropout crisis*. Retrieved from http://www.clms.neu.edu/publication/documents/CLMS_2009_Dropout_Report.pdf
- Cooper, R., & Liou, D. D. (2007). The structure and culture of information pathways: Rethinking opportunity to learn in urban high schools during the ninth grade transition. *The High School Journal, 91*, 43-56.
- Cushman, K. (2006). Help us make the 9th grade transition. *Educational Leadership, 63*(7) 47-52.
- Dimmitt, C., & Carey, J. (2007). Using the ASCA National Model to facilitate school transitions. *Professional School Counseling, 10*, 227-232.
- Graber, J. A., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (1996). Transitions and turning points: Navigating the passage from childhood through adolescence. *Developmental Psychology, 32*, 768-776.
- Hertzog, C., & Morgan, P. (1997). From middle school to high school: Ease the transition. *Education Digest, 62*(7), 29-31.
- Letrello, T. M., & Miles, D. D. (2003). The transition from middle school to high school; students with and without learning disabilities share their perceptions. *Clearing House, 76*, 212-214.
- Lindsay, D. (1998). Middle-level to high-school transition. *Education Digest, 63*(6), 62-64.
- McCallumore, K. M., & Sparapani, E. F. (2010). The importance of the ninth grade on high school graduation rates and student success in high school. *Education, 130*, 447-456.
- Neild, R. C. (2009). Falling off track during the transition to high school: What we know and what can be done. *Future of Children, 19*, 53-76
- Newman, B. M., Newman, P. R., Griffen, S., O'Connor, K., & Spas, J. (2007). The relationship of social support to depressive symptoms during the transition to high school. *Adolescence, 42*, 441-460.
- Turner, S. L. (2007). Preparing inner-city adolescents to transition into high school. *Professional School Counseling, 10*, 245-252.